

1
公野 櫻子
イラスト・みぶなつき

Baby Princess

Congratulations! Your true family is here!!

～ベイビー・プリンセス～

電撃文庫

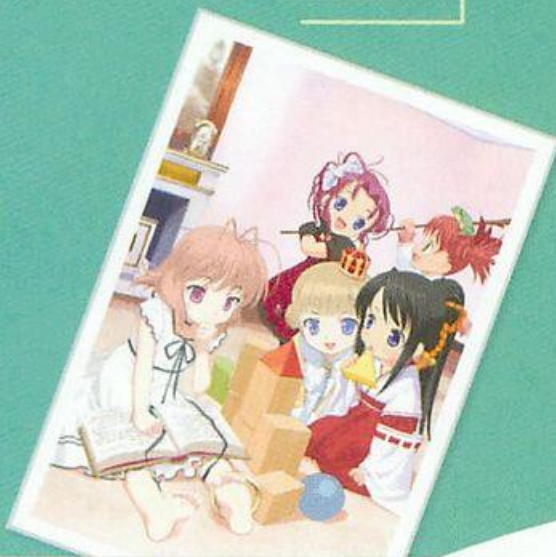
Baby Princess 1

~ベイベー・プリンセス~

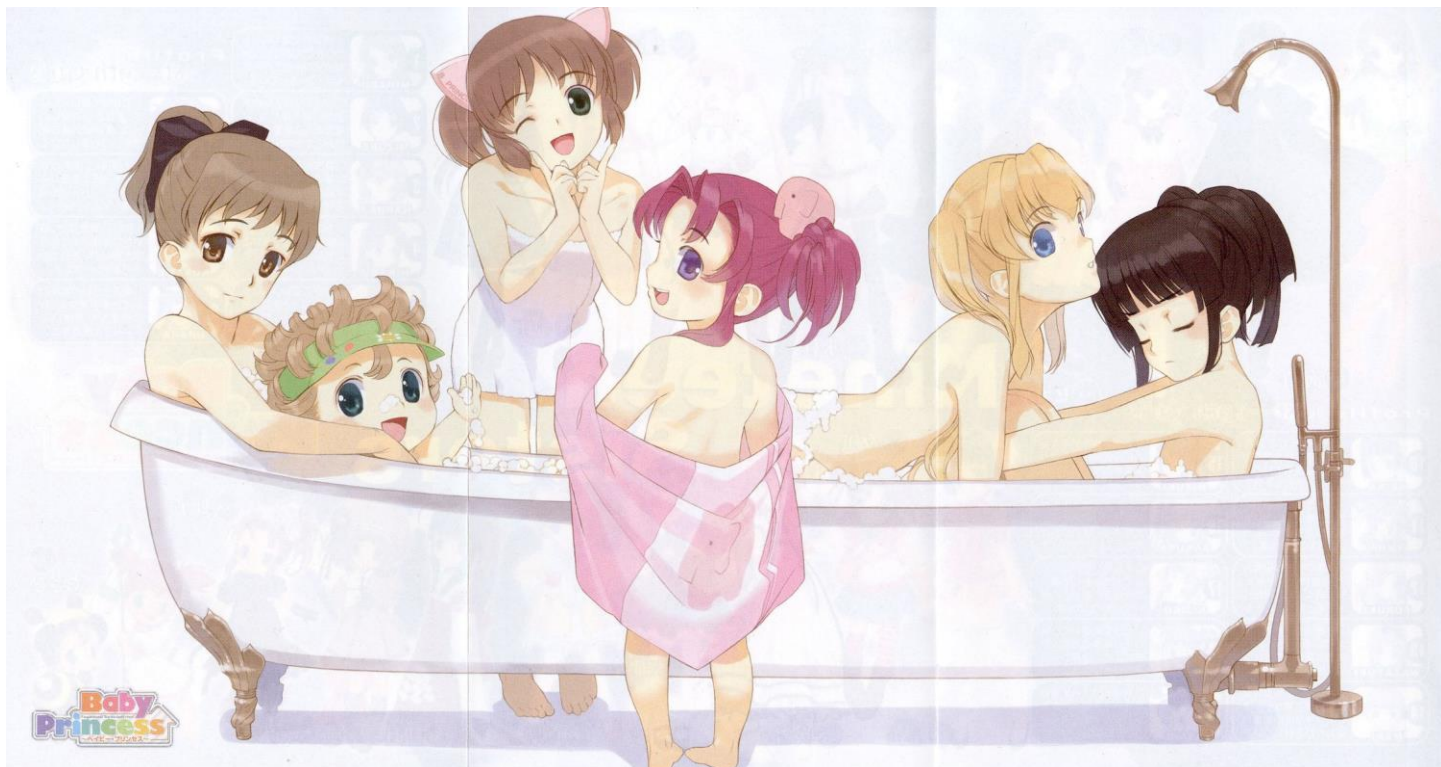
公野櫻子

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CONGRATULATIONS!



YOUR TRUE FAMILY IS HERE!!



Nineteen Sisters

Profile 1st-9th Girls

1	MIHARU	姉妹をたばねるしつかり者でお茶目な長女。朝の情報番組でお天気キャスターをしている。
2	MIZORE	ミステリアスな妹。理想に身をゆだね、なぜかあんな可愛さうつがみどころのない人物。
3	HARUKA	将来の夢はお嫁さんになること……という清純無垢な乙女。頼れる男性に憧れている。
4	HIKARU	姉妹の中の「男役」が強い姉妹たちを守るために己を鍛える、ボーイッシュな美少女。
5	HOTARU	素直で優しい姉。姉の青雫とともに、家事を初め何でもこなす。コスプレが趣味。
6	TSURARA	気が強く扱いにくいのが、家族思いの優しい少女。体の弱い妹の補食をいつも兼っている。
7	RIKKA	その場にいるだけで周囲を明るくするムードメーカー。トラブルの火種になることも？
8	KOSAME	引っ込み思案で、華やかな姉妹の中では目立たないが、思いやりのある優しい女の子。
9	URARA	美人をろい姉妹の中、一番の美少女。なのに重度の男嫌い。ディープな鉄道マニア。

Profile 10th-19th Girls

10	SEIKA	いつも元気で素直。「三國志」の世界や登場人物に憧れていて、カンフーを習っている。
11	YUNA	自分は魔法使いの子孫だと思い込んでいる。魔法のおもな使いみちは、恋愛と宿願方面。
12	FUBUKI	異常に優秀な記憶力とIQを持つ天才少女。熱に弱く、目が眩転しすぎると倒れることも。
13	WATAYUKI	体が弱く、部屋で休んでいることが多い。運動は運動は負けない。健康な笑顔の持ち主。
14	MARI	厳格でおしゃまな女王蜂気質。マリーアントワネットの生まれ変わりだと信じている。
15	MIZUKI	妖怪や幽霊が見えるという霊感幼女。強力な金毛九尾の狐の守護霊がついているらしい。
16	SAKURA	とにかく泣き虫で甘えん坊。甘いお菓子が大好きで、食いしん坊などところもわんわん。
17	HIJIKO	まだ幼いけれど、とってもおしゃやれで歌うのが好き。ピンクの家のツレツレが友達。
18	SORA	とってもかっこいい女の子。ままごとや人形遊び、虫取りや花が好きな活発タイプ。
19	ASAHI	やっぱハイハイを始めようになった赤ちゃんな。あやすとよく笑う。元気な嵐！

Profile 20th-29th Girls

20	AKI	姉妹の中の「男役」が強い姉妹たちを守るために己を鍛える、ボーイッシュな美少女。
21	HIKARU	素直で優しい姉。姉の青雫とともに、家事を初め何でもこなす。コスプレが趣味。
22	HOTARU	素直で優しい姉。姉の青雫とともに、家事を初め何でもこなす。コスプレが趣味。
23	TSURARA	気が強く扱いにくいのが、家族思いの優しい少女。体の弱い妹の補食をいつも兼っている。
24	RIKKA	その場にいるだけで周囲を明るくするムードメーカー。トラブルの火種になることも？
25	KOSAME	引っ込み思案で、華やかな姉妹の中では目立たないが、思いやりのある優しい女の子。
26	URARA	美人をろい姉妹の中、一番の美少女。なのに重度の男嫌い。ディープな鉄道マニア。
27	SEIKA	いつも元気で素直。「三國志」の世界や登場人物に憧れていて、カンフーを習っている。
28	YUNA	自分は魔法使いの子孫だと思い込んでいる。魔法のおもな使いみちは、恋愛と宿願方面。
29	FUBUKI	異常に優秀な記憶力とIQを持つ天才少女。熱に弱く、目が眩転しすぎると倒れることも。

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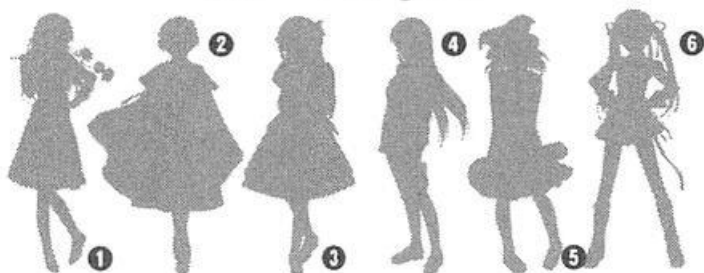
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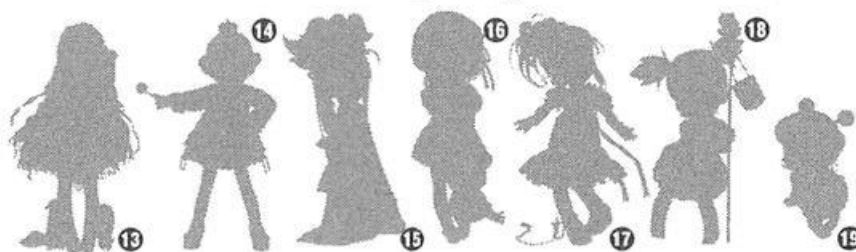
1st—6th Girls



7th—12th Girls



13th—19th Girls



CONGRATULATIONS! YOUR TRUE FAMILY IS HERE!!

Prologue – Boy meets–

Here she comes!

The moment this thought ran through my head, it was too late to do anything. I received a huge shock to the face, and then pain spread across it. My body was lifted up, and it felt as though I had been blown away. My left eye felt strangely hot. Stars were flying around inside my head. The moment the glove connected with my face, my vision went pure white...And then, it immediately began darkening. My consciousness was blacking out and a silence was engulfing me.

Ahh...am I just going to die like this? Something feels surprisingly good, so I guess its fine...

But, the soft sensation that felt as though I was drifting on a cloud was just a momentary feeling, and did not last that long. According to the story I heard later, the moment I was hit by Hikaru's punch, I went flying in a funny way that looked like I had grown wings out my back. ...Yeah, as if! Whatever the real story is, at that time, I had no say in the matter.

On that day, I was dragged by a beautiful girl whom I had met for the first time onto the practice ring of a boxing gym. Said girl herself delivered such a hard punch to my face that the surrounding spectators were amazed. And I, without even trying to guard it, received it fully.

It was my first time even wearing a boxing glove, let alone participating in a sparring match! I faintly remember that there was a sudden uproar and the surrounding people ran to help me. What happened after that, I have no idea. When I came to, I had a wet, cold towel draped over my face, and I was lying on a black, hard sofa in the Gym office.

And Hikaru...

Was staring intently at me.

With a terribly serious look.

She had been waiting for me to wake up.

Waiting for me to recover from the most brutal damage I had received in my whole life.

And then, she listened to my story, and led me to a new world.

A world different from my old one.

A world that I could not have even dreamed of before...

Chapter 1 – First Contact

1

On December 14, 2:00 pm, Grandma died.

Standing in front of the closed and silent, heavy looking silver door with a big handle attached to it, Youtarou thought: *Ahh... now there is no one in this whole world who I can call my relative...*

It was December. And even though winter had set in, in the new beautiful and strange funeral hall it was warm, just enough to cause slight sweating. There was a huge silver door, much like a bank vault door Youtarou once saw in a movie. And, on top of it, as if to make sure nobody could get near, a huge gold and black cremation hall style door was closed. As if it was telling him that there was no coming back from the other side. For a second, his hands shook.

This really is the end, isn't it...? Wait, stop. Please open the door. Don't take Grandma away from me! He felt as if a small child was shouting from somewhere far away. Of course, even if he thought that, he knew nothing was going to change. You can cry and shout all you want, but the truth remains that dead people can't be brought back. Much less Grandma, who was pretty old. She did die of sudden Cerebral Hemorrhage, but it wasn't unusual for her age. It was a painless death. You could say that she almost died a natural death. It was his duty to send Grandma off.

Grandma, thanks for all you have done for me until now. Of course, I do think that becoming kin—less at this age sure is unlucky, but that too is my destiny, so there is no helping it. I have no place to return to and no place to live, and frankly I have no idea what I should do from now on, but, for now, I'll just thank Grandma who was there for me and raised me, after both Mom and Dad died.

Thank you, Grandma.

The person in charge of the funeral, wearing a black suit with a black tie, and wearing white gloves made a deep bow to him in silence. In front of the closed door were placed the memorial tablet and portrait.

You don't need to bow your head so deeply to this...lanky student. Youtarou thought.

Grandma was laughing in the memorial portrait that was surrounded by black ribbons. Youtarou became self-conscious of himself because of the blue school blazer and the dark

blue pants that he had intentionally bought a size larger than his fit. He had a light blue cheerful tie and a little creased uniform on, which didn't suit this place filled with mourning people with placid faces. Even the kid that he saw in the hallway who looked to be about kindergarten age had a more proper attire.

I guess parents do these types of things for their children? I don't have any experiences like that, so I wouldn't know. As he was starting to feel uncomfortable, the clerk looked back at him and said:

"It'll take about an hour and a half, so please wait in the waiting room."

The neighbors who Grandma had gotten along with well clasped their hands together, and reciting *Nanmandabu Nanmandabu*¹ bowed again and again towards the big black and gold door.

"Misora-san, we'll be following you soon, so wait for us." They said.

Youtarou couldn't bear it anymore, so he went outside. It was a refreshingly unexpected deep blue sky for December. Hoping to catch a look of the smoke of the cremation of Grandma, he searched for a chimney, but didn't spot one.

It would be troubling for the people of the neighborhood, so I guess they don't make them anymore. The big parking lot was surrounded by a forest. *Ah, I see. It's not like in that Kindaichi Kosuke's movie that I saw on TV once. You don't become ash and smoke and rise gracefully towards the sky. Not anymore. Even though it's called cremation, it's not like you're setting the fire yourself. All you have to do is throw a switch...*

The sky he was gazing at all alone seemed infinitely empty...

¹ A Japanese prayer

Ten days after the funeral, on 24 December. The last day of the second semester.

On that day of the Closing Ceremony, Youtarou was in the Kendo Club Room that was attached to the side of the gym. When he had enrolled in Nino Private Junior High school at the Grandma's recommendation, it was compulsory for boys to enter a physical activities oriented club. Out of all the various clubs, he had decided to join the Kendo Club. Judo looked too hard, Baseball looked too harsh, Sumo was out of the question, Volleyball shorts were too tight, er...

Out of all these dismal choices only Kendo was left. Today was the last competition which the Kendo Club was participating in. The opposing team was the one that was known as the strongest team in the area, the Golden Dragons. In the club, there was already a mood of defeat floating around. Even though the school is called Private, the studies here were so—so, the club activities were also so—so, and the whole school was just so—so. It wasn't a school that could compete with such a strong team. When the match was decided, a lot of complaints and questions as to who decided the match were heard from the lazy members. Actually, he had thought that too.

But yeah, too late for that now.

Will this become a good memory? He mused.

This would be his last day at this school. Grandma died so suddenly, so he hadn't been able to do any withdrawal procedures yet. He didn't think that he could remain in this private school for the 3rd semester. Grandma lived a simple life, and was far from being wealthy. And after she died, he did try searching but found nothing resembling a bank book containing money. He had already guessed that from their daily lives, but for now, he felt he should be thankful to her for letting him go to a normal school, no matter how so—so it may have been. And even if he did find some money, going to this Private School would be difficult, because he had lost his only guardian. So he had decided that he would drop out of the school as soon as winter was over.

That's why—

No, because of that.

Just for once...

He decided to try his best.

Eei! I will take my chances and aim for the win! Today, I am feeling just a bit confident. No, rather than saying confident, I guess I am feeling a bit desperate. He thought to himself with some measure of self—deprecation.

“Men! Dou! Kote!”² Facing the wall at the end of the dojo, he practiced various moves in his armor while sorting through his feelings. *That’s right. Just for once. It’s my last match. Even if I’m not that confident, what’s wrong with me trying to take the lead role once in a while?* Thinking that, he announced that he would like to have a match with the mysterious beautiful swordswoman of the Golden Dragons.

That’s right. His partner today would be a girl. Said swordswoman, while a girl, was rumored to have considerable skill, and was the captain at her own school. But the school she was enrolled at, Konohana Private Academy, had only become co-ed 3 years ago. It was an All-Girls school before that, and a pretty high class one at that. It still had a population of about 80% women, and becoming fed up with the low level of the team of the school, the swordswoman joined the Golden Dragons, the strongest team in the area, all alone.

Her name was...Amatsuka Hikaru.

She seemed magnificent just from her name. Before Grandma had died, he wouldn’t even have considered having a match with such a high class swordswoman. He would just have thought that it didn’t have anything to do with him. That’s why, he would’ve have joined his teammates who were not even trying to hide their ulterior motives as they used Rock Papers Scissors to decide who would enter in the contest against the swordswoman. Because as luck would have it, 4 days before the match, just as he had completed all of Grandma’s funeral procedures and returned to school, her opponent’s position became empty. Their member of the team who was supposed to face her got a sprain.

He wanted to become stronger.

He had no choice but to make himself stronger.

She on the other hand, had joined and proven herself in a team consisting of men only. Such magnificent strength, from his point of view, was like an unattainable flower...

He wanted to boldly stand as equals with her.

² Various parts of Kendo armor. One has to shout their respective names while hitting them to score a point.

"She's ultra-strong, you know!" everyone warned him. But just one last time, he wanted to do something with his meaningless life. Just for once, he wanted to believe that there were some good points about him too.

That's why...he tried to get the position to fight her. Half of it was out of desperation, but half of it was serious resolve. His opponent was a girl after all, and even though he had entered the club on a whim and barely practiced, he was surprisingly good at Kendo. That's how he had become a member after all.

Maybe a miracle will occur. Even I can do it, if I try! That's what he wanted to think. He wanted to do something big and stand out...

I wonder if it was just my wishful thinking after all... He thought while fighting a losing battle in the narrow arena taped out inside the dojo. He was already a point behind.

"Haa!" With a shout to fire herself up, his dignified opponent came at him without a single other thought.

"Haa!"

"Haaaa!!"

Through the slit in the *Men*³, he caught a glimpse of a pair of big bright eyes shining with determination. He was having trouble just trying to dodge her blows. The cheering of the crowd and his own hastiness was making it hard for him to think straight. In no time, she had already scored a point. And in rapid succession, another powerful blow was coming.

Oh, shi-! He barely dodged it. *Now that it has come to this, it doesn't matter if I'm not elegant or run around, I've got to find an opening to strike.* He started swinging around his *Sinai*⁴ wildly, like a kid on a rampage. Moving around recklessly, and gulping down all his doubts, he somehow stood his ground. If he lost here, it would be too pitiful.

He remembered his empty life...and how kind Grandma had been to him.

Now that it's come to this, I'll have to reverse this situation with one solid strike from above... *Okay, now!* Is what he thought. At that moment he heard something go *Bashin* and Hikaru's single stroke from above decided everything. He was one step too far. It was like cross counter.

³ Kendo armor mask.

⁴ Wooden sword used in Kendo.

Did I even last 2 minutes?

He had lost. Completely.

His amateurish plan to attack from above aiming for the *Men* had completely failed against the fast movements of his opponent. He didn't have one good moment in the whole match.

Ahh, I guess it really was impossible...

He went outside and took off his *Men*. Sitting down on the floor, he leaned back on his hands, exhausted, defeated. *It's true, the more you get your hopes up, the more it hurts when they are all dashed to pieces. I guess even if the likes of me tires to struggle this late in the game, nothing is gonna come out of it.*

Wheezing and drawing in rough breaths, he just sat on the floor, discouraged. Somehow, it felt like he was feeling the gravitational pull of Earth more than usual. And his surrounding club members just stood silently at a distance, not knowing what to say. Normally, the club members would laugh and tease him, saying "*We told you it would be impossible for you.*" But seeing his unusually serious figure, they were unable to say anything. Especially to him, who had lost his only family recently. Any normal high-school student wouldn't be able to find any words. He became even more depressed, and thinking he had to get away, left the dojo.

Outside the dojo it was pretty sunny. Inside the school grounds, there were many evergreen trees, and even in winter, it got a lot of sunlight. When he looked at the sky- yup, it was the same empty sky as that day. He was close to the water faucets that were installed outside the dojo.

I'm thirsty.

Filling his cupped hands with cold winter water, he drank his fill. Maybe it was because he had pushed his body to the limit because of nervousness, but his throat was completely dry, and the cold water felt incredibly nice as it slid down his throat. He hesitated but for a moment, then mumbling "I guess its fine...", lowered his head and ran the cold water over his sweaty face and head. This time, it felt shockingly cold. He trembled involuntarily.

"Owa-" As he hastily stopped the water with one hand, and wiped his face with the other, a voice said:

"You can use this." And someone pressed a towel to his face.

"Ah thanks."

Because his vision was blocked by the towel, he had no idea whose voice it was. All he knew was that it was a girl's voice. He hurriedly wiped his face clean and timidly turned around, coming face to face with the pair of big, determined eyes that had been constantly gazing at him from beneath the *Men* during the match. Amatsuka Hikaru, whose white, delicate face had been hidden under her armor during the match now stood before him with her face uncovered.

He was overwhelmed for a moment. She had small mouth accompanying her big beautiful eyes, and a firm face full of determination. On her head, below her towel were well-kept long and straight chestnut colored hair tied in a ponytail, which was swaying in the in the wind.

"Do you have something to do after this?" She asked me without wasting a breath.

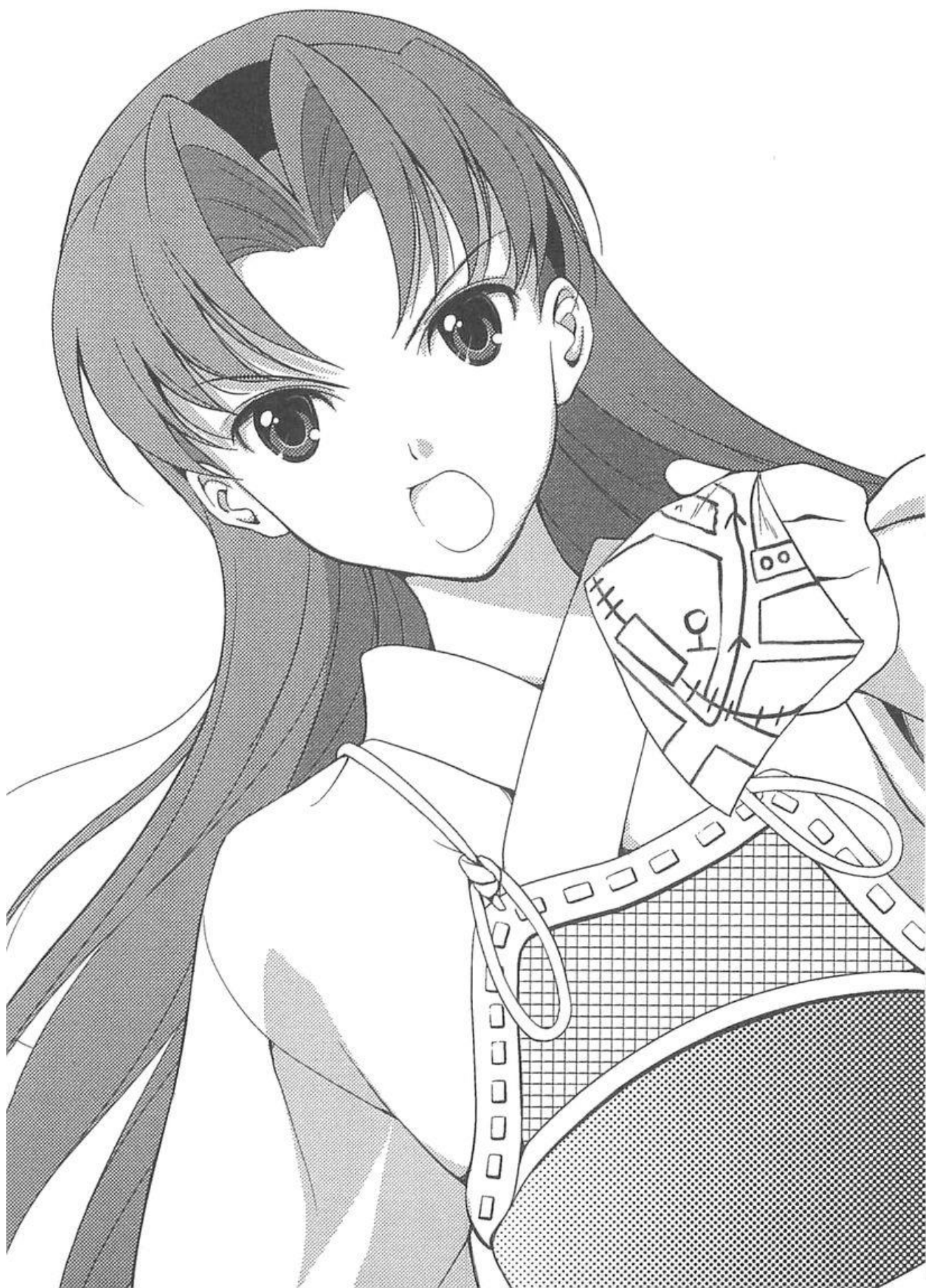
"Not really." He replied after thinking for a bit. After all, he had nothing do except return to that apartment without Grandma with a heavy heart.

"Then there is a place I want you to come."

"Eh?"

"That's why, take this." She suddenly held out a note. As she held it out, she seemed to hesitate a bit. He couldn't take it because his hands were still wet. "I'll be waiting. Make sure to come, okay?"

She suddenly took a set forward, stuck the paper inside the breastplate of his armor without taking care not to crumple it, and turned on her heel and walked away quickly.



“Eh? Ah, wa-wait! What’s this?” As he hastily took the memo in his hands, the paper instantly became wet, and the pencil lines on it began to smear. *Ahh, this is bad.* He hurriedly wrapped it in the towel he was holding.

Ah, that’s right. I’ve got to return this towel too. Thinking that, he spread the palm-sized memo on the towel and took a good look at it. There was something like a map drawn on it. It was the station next to the station where he got off. About 2 minutes from here by foot.

Hmm, it’s gotten a bit wet so I can’t read the details that well. Where is this?

Drops of water dripped down from his still wet hair.

And then, Youtarou was in a room of the boxing gym he had arrived at following the map and gotten beaten up at.

“Are you alright?” As he woke up, Hikaru noticed and called out to him softly. And as he tried to answer *Yeah*, the movement of his face sent pain shooting up his left temple.

“Ouch!”

“Ah, sorry.” Saying that, Hikaru gently laid down a towel over his left eye and forehead. The ice pack that was placed between the folded towels flopped down onto his face.

“Ugh!” Even that stung.

“Ah, I guess it is a bit swollen after all.” Hikaru said as she frowned. “Wait here, I’ll bring a new ice pack right away!” Saying that, Hikaru left the room in somewhat of a hurry. After silently watching her leave the room, Youtarou began looking around the room with his open right eye.

Under the bare fluorescent bulbs, he could see a drab gym office with gray steel furniture. Here and there, posters of boxers in various fighting poses were hung up. Among the furniture, the only expensive looking things were cabinets filled with trophies and shields, and a champion belt that looked to be about Hikaru’s size.

It finally came back to him as to why he was lying here. After Hikaru had given him the map, even though he was thoroughly confused, he had gone to the place drawn on it, which was this boxing gym. *It wasn’t because I was interested in Hikaru, I just wanted to return her towel...I guess that’s not completely true.* But if he had to pick one, his biggest reason for coming here was probably that he had nothing else to do. After that, he would probably have returned to Grandma’s house and played some games. That was about the extent of what he had to do.

To sum it up: 1, because I was free and had nothing else to do. 2, because Hikaru is cute. 3, because I had to return the towel. Those are probably the reasons I came here.

But really, he did not even imagine that he would suddenly be made a sparring partner. He lightly pressed down the still slightly cold towel on his left eye and sat up.

“Ita-!” He was kind of used to the pain now, but it still stung. The door opened, and Hikaru peeked in from the gap.

“Oh, you can already move around? That’s a relief. I guess you do have willpower after all.” She hurried over to him, and with gentler hands than he was expecting, changed his towels. She then placed two cider bottles side by side on the desk.

“While I was looking for a new ice pack, I found these in the gym fridge. Drinking them in here would be kind of a waste, so shall we go outside?”

They were near a riverbed.

Hikaru had lead them to the bank of a river near the gym, where they sat down side by side. They couldn't see it from here, but on the other side of the river was Youtarou's home. A home he was going to lose soon. Hikaru seemed to be thirsty and drank the whole bottle of cider in one go, and then threw a stone at the surface of the water.

1, 2, 3.

The stone skipped three times on water.

"But I've got to say, you're pretty weak." Hikaru said suddenly with an impressed face without even looking at Youtarou. He was a little taken aback.

"You're probably too strong, is all." Hearing this, Hikaru turned towards him.

"Then, why did you go out of your way to have a match with me?"

Youtarou stayed silent.

"Didn't you volunteer to become my opponent in that match? It looked like you had no ulterior motives either. You were seriously trying to fight to win - At least that is what it looked like to me."

Of course, since I really was trying to win.

"He's so amateurish, so weak, so why did he volunteer to fight with me?" I thought I had found a guy who would fight me seriously, so I even called you to a boxing match, but you were no good at that either."

Yeah, that's also natural, since I have never done boxing before.

"I guess it's because I'm a woman, but out of all the guys who fight with me, the weak guys always fight with me for some ulterior motive and the strong guys never get serious. Either they are mocking me because I'm a woman, or they are afraid of losing to a woman in serious match. But you, you were different."

I have lost fair and square. Isn't it enough to leave it at that? Youtarou didn't want to tell Hikaru why he had gotten so desperate in that match.

"You were *really* serious in that match. It was kind of mysterious really. I wonder why."

He didn't really want to get in that discussion, so without answering her question, he posed one of his own:

"Then I'll ask you, why are you doing 2 martial arts at once? Both Kendo and Boxing. Isn't it kind of rare to see a girl doing either of these sports?"

"Me?" Hikaru paused for a moment. She was searching for another stone to throw.

"Because I want to- because I *have* to get stronger. Much, much more." As she said this, she threw the stone with a fast flick of her wrist. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 times the stone skipped over the surface of the water.

"That's why, I'm also doing Karate and Naginata⁵ practice in addition to Kendo and Boxing."

"But why so many?" I asked. Wasn't she already strong enough?

"Because there are people that I have to protect no matter what. I've got to become as strong as- no, probably even stronger than a man or else I won't be able to protect them." Hikaru said bluntly.

"People you have to protect...?" Youtarou wondered aloud. *Maybe her boyfriend?*

"My little sisters...well, I have older sisters too, so I guess all my sisters. My sisters...or you could say my whole family..."

Youtarou nodded. Hikaru's sisters were probably all very beautiful. If they were not as strong as Hikaru, they probably needed someone to protect them.

"Our father is not around. At least if we had a brother, that'd be nice, but there are no men in our family. That's why I have to become even stronger." Then she smiled. That smile was really cute.

"Then, I'm the same as you. I also want to become stronger. I haven't really done anything with my life until now. And I don't have a single living relative. I finally realized that –and it has become sort of unavoidable now– I want to become stronger. I had to live all alone from now on. That's why I wanted to defeat a strong person such as you, to give myself some confidence."

The last part was mostly monologue.

"All alone? No living relative?" Hikaru tilted her head. "What's that all about?"

⁵ A long spear ending in a curved blade.

For some reason, Youtarou felt like telling Hikaru his story. Was it because her smile was cute? No, it was probably because he felt that Hikaru was thinking seriously about him. This super strong and beautiful girl was probably serious in everything she did. She was probably the type who was considerate sincerely about her opponent at all times...

“So now you know about his situation, what are you going to do about it, Hikaru-chan?”

In the comfortable air-conditioned room, the grownup voice of Amatsuka Miharu echoed.

“What am I going to do about it...?” Hikaru said with a slightly lowered voice. There was no chance for Youtarou to interrupt the two sisters. As Hikaru was explaining the situation, Youtarou was sitting in the middle of the room on a large white square sofa without anything to do.

After sitting for 20 minutes on a Private Local Train from the local train station near Youtarou’s house, he was led by Hikaru to a brand new Metro Station. A humble student like Youtarou, wearing a dull blazer uniform, felt very out of place in the expensive looking city. Even he, who didn’t know the name of the building they were entering, felt the high value because of the single symbol of a small olive tree. There was a small door plate with the title True House. Even the interior was very expensive looking. The interior had distinct accents of glass, polished wood and silver. Small, delicate, colorful accessories that Youtarou did not see often and were found in 100 Yen shops were lying here and there. The very description of elegant. What was even more surprising that in the middle of the courtyard there was a lawn in the middle of which was a huge Zelkova tree. Right now, he was looking down on that lit up courtyard through the huge glass windows of the top floor.

Which museum is this? Youtarou thought in awe. *Why am I here again?*

He was suddenly jolted from my thoughts, as Hikaru drew a quick breath and said: “I was thinking of having him stay at our place.”

“Eh?”

“Haa!?” As Miharu obviously became surprised, Youtarou was also shocked. Doubly so.

Where is this coming from!?

“Are you saying, that we should have him live with us?”

“Because it’s hard to feign ignorance when you know he’s gonna have no place to live, right, Miharu-nee?” Hikaru replied with a very serious face. Evidently this person with a kind aura who looked like a grownup Hikaru wearing pastel colored clothes was Hikaru’s older sister Miharu.

“B-But...”

At that moment, the chair at the CEO's table in front of them, which had been turned around all this time, suddenly swiveled around and someone said:

"Wow! That's a brilliant idea! Hikaru-chan, you really are the best! I wonder why you weren't born a real boy. It's such a waste!" Sitting there, behind a large desk, was a woman who had been silently listening up till now. She looked like both Hikaru and Miharuru, but was about 3 times more beautiful than both of them.

"Mama has always thought so. Ever since I closed down the geisha house that Grandma ran and opened up this entertainment company True House, I had a particular dream. Ahh, Sound of Music⁶!" She clapped her hands and was obviously happy. Miharuru smiled wryly, and Hikaru...Hikaru smiled with relief.

"The center of entertainment is family after all! The Trap Family Singers!" But, be it Jackson Five or any other family group, the lead vocal needs to be a hot guy, right? The lead is always a stud! That is like, the law of the universe!"

"I don't think that's really the case..." As Miharuru said in a small voice, the woman behind the table slammed down her hands on the table. The small silver plate that said 'President' on the table rattled.

"Naïve! That's why you have long way to go, Miharuru! If you want to take over this company in the future, remember this clearly! The lead is always a stud! There, repeat after me!"

"The lead is a stud..." Miharuru looked over to Youtarou with puppy eyes and an expression that almost said *Please take pity on me*.

"You know, the creatures known as girls love Princes, no matter what anyone says. They are always dreaming about their Prince who will come and whisk them away. If we don't make money off that, what else on this earth will we make money off of? Selling dreams is our job, right? But, the sad reality is that all my children are girls..."

"Mama, maybe you did not want girls at all?" Hikaru interjected suddenly.

"You are such an air head, Hikaru-chan. That's not it! That's not it at all. Having a lot of daughters is awesome too! Because male fans are so dedicated, even if female idol groups have a large number of idols, they can follow along. But for the studs, they have to have the center stage all alone or it just doesn't work!"

'President'...It seems like this person is Miharuru and Hikaru's mother.

⁶ Sound of Music, The Trap Family Singers, Jackson Five are all names of various family-group bands.



After completing her speech with exaggerated body motions, 'Mama' turned towards Youtarou and stared at him.

"Hm, it all checks out. I'm all OK for taking you as my son!"

It seems like I have been given the OK...

"Really? Mama!" Hikaru said in delight.

"Yeah well, our house has so many daughters that we could practically sell them, so one more member is fine, right?"

"You shouldn't put it like that, Mama." Miharu retorted, probably for Youtarou's sake. That's because he had become a little scared.

A lot? So many that they can sell them? Just how many are there?

Mama continued "And you know, for Hikaru-chan to like a boy is pretty rare right? Mama is kind of relieved now. I was worried about what to do if Hikaru-chan turned out to be a lesbian. I mean, you know how you used to sleep together with Haruka on the same bed? Mama really doesn't have any prejudice against gay or lesbians, but since you were sisters..."

"Mama!!"

Miharu and Hikaru both shouted in exasperation.

"What are you going to do if Youtarou-kun believes it!?"

Oh what, so it's not true, phew... At this point, Youtarou was so amazed at the extreme behavior of 'Mama' the president that he couldn't even say anything.

"Ah, but if I remember correctly, our household has a girl that hates men..." Mama stopped with a complex look on her face.

"Ah..." Hikaru also froze.

But this time, Miharu spoke up. "Then, why don't you make Youtarou-kun a long lost family member?"

"Ah, I like the sound of that!" Mama said, lightly placing her fist in her palm.

Oi! Is it really fine just like that!?

"Mama has always wanted a son!" Mama came over to Youtarou and hugged him.

Uwah~. He became stiff as a board.

“Today is December the 24, meaning its Christmas Eve. So I guess you are our Christmas present on this holy eve? Wahh~. Working diligently really pays off right? I look forward to living with you, my son! I’ll take good care of you.”

She gave him such a kind and elegant smile that it made him a little dizzy. And then she leaned in so that only he could hear and said: “But there is a one year trial period. If, after one year, even one of my cute daughters says ‘NO!’ to living together with you, then...”

And this is how Youtarou’s fate was decided.

Chapter 2 - Nineteen Sisters

The next day, 25th December.

“That person– Taiyou-kun, right? So dreamy! Isn’t his name perfect for our family? Just like the brilliant sun in the sky, I’m sure he will become a bright sun that will shine upon everyone in our family!” Haruka spoke in a dreamy voice.

“Not Taiyou, Youtarou⁷!” Hikaru interjected bluntly.

As Haruka made space for clothes in the wardrobe and went about cleaning up the room that they would sharing again from today onwards, Hikaru was confused as she wondered.

Yesterday, she had forcibly taken Youtarou to her mother’s place, but how had her actions looked from another person’s perspective? Obviously, Miharu-nee was a bit surprised, and her mother’s actions were a mystery as ever, but what about the person himself? What was Youtarou thinking right about now?

Now that she thought about it, they didn’t ask for his opinion on the matter even once!

Could it be that, he is actually against coming to our house? Hikaru thought worriedly. It’s true that she had not let Miharu or Mama say much by using social justice as a front –*I definitely won’t leave him alone on the streets!*– And Mama and Miharu had probably intuitively recognized her conviction as well. What surprised Hikaru most was their attitude toward the whole matter. As Miharu had pointed out, including all their little sisters, there were lots of girls at their house. Well, nineteen to be exact. She had thought that they would show a little more resistance to the proposal. She remembered how her mother had said that Youtarou was the first boy Hikaru had taken a ‘liking’ to. Yes, Hikaru admitted honestly to herself, she did hold him in a relatively better light. But it was completely different from the ‘Love’ or ‘Boyfriend’ that her other sisters were always talking about. ‘Like’ also didn’t sit right with her. She just...She was just worried about him.

His last relative had died and he had nowhere to live. Wouldn’t one normally invite such a person to live in his own house? Hikaru did not know that that kind of “normal” didn’t exist

⁷ Basically, his name is written as “陽太郎” , “Youtarou”, and only reading the latter two characters “太郎” makes it “Taiyou”, or Sun.

anywhere in the whole world. Hikaru was thinking that her current feelings were probably of pity right now.

“Yup, with this, moving rooms is over.” Hikaru said, after putting everything away.

“It’s been quite a while since I shared a room with Hikaru-chan. It’s kind of nostalgic. When you moved into another room, this room felt so big and empty at first, but somewhere along the way I got pretty used to it. Let’s get along again, Hikaru-chan.” Wearing a cute one piece dress as usual, Haruka suddenly came over to Hikaru in front of the closet and rubbed her cheek against Hikaru’s like they were a pair of lovers. A sweet smell reached Hikaru. *It’s a really feminine smell.* Hikaru had always thought.

Haruka liked one piece dresses, she liked ribbons, she liked the pink color, and she always had this fluffy and soft smell about her. She was like sweet candy, this girl. The third daughter was older than Hikaru and a High-school freshman. Haruka was the older one, but to Hikaru she was like a cute little sister. They had always been in the same room, so unlike the other two older sisters, she had always called her just ‘Haruka’. Once, they even went to sleep while hugging because Haruka was crying due to the thunderstorm outside. To Hikaru, Haruka was an older sister who she had to always protect. Of course, for Hikaru, almost everything was something she had to protect, like in Youtarou’s case.

“I’m sorry. Because of me we had to go back to sharing one room.” Hikaru said, looking at the room which was arranged like a room from a girl’s dormitory, with two beds against opposite walls. Since Hikaru had brought up the whole thing, Youtarou was getting her room, and she was back in this room which was Haruka’s, and had, of course, pink colored curtains.

“That’s nothing to worry about! I’m happy that I’m with Hikaru-chan again. If a thunderstorm starts raging outside, I’ll just snuggle up to Hikaru-chan again.” Haruka said and stuck her tongue out slightly. And then, she suddenly hushed her voice. “Putting that aside Hikaru-chan, Haruka was wondering, this person named Taiyou– ...”

“Like I said, it’s Youtarou, not Taiyou!” Hikaru interjected.

“Even if you say that, his name does mean ‘sun’ right?”

“Rather than writing ‘Rou’ with ‘Taiyou’, normally you would write his name as ‘You’ with ‘Tarou’, right? That is more correct.”

“Hmm, you’re right. Tarou can also mean ‘Only son’, right? Then, isn’t it just...”

“Just...what?”

“Isn’t it just perfect? For our family I mean.” Haruka said, with just a hint of a blush in her cheeks.

“Oh, that again. Well, if Haruka thinks like that, then I’m a bit relieved. But like I explained earlier, you have to keep Youtarou’s circumstances a secret. Mama decided after consulting Miharune and Mizorenee that it would be best if we didn’t tell anyone about it.”

“Iyan~! Silly Hikaru-chan. Of course I know that. That’s not it. The thing is...”

“You’ve still got something to ask?”

“The thing is...” Haruka once again lowered her voice and drew close to Hikaru excitedly as if she had some big secret to share.

“That Taiyou-kun...”

“Youtarou!”

“Geez, Hikaru-chan, you meanie! Hmph! I’ll call him Youtarou or whatever I want...Anyways, could it be that that Taiyou-kun is our “Real” brother?”

“Haaa!?” Hikaru froze. Haruka’s face took on a dreamy expression and her gaze lingered into empty space.

“It’s a spectacular thing...Let me summarize what Miharune told me. First, the small but successful entertainment company True House that Mama runs was looking to expand its business. When they were scouting for their new Hot Boys program, one of the faces among the various scouts somehow interested Mom. After asking him various things, it turned out that he was our long lost brother that was separated from us at birth...That’s the setting right?” Haruka, tilting her head on her forefinger in an endearing fashion, explained to Hikaru step by step as if she were a detective showing off her super theory. “We are all girls in this house, so for us to live peacefully and accept Taiyou-kun, who has lost his own real family, and to live with him while thinking of him as our real family, we have to explain his circumstances in that way. Especially to that girl who is younger than Hotaru-chan. I know that of course, and Haruka thinks that doing that would be for the best.”

“Well then, I don’t see—”

“But, for Mama to come up with a story like that on the spot, don’t you think it’s a bit strange?” Haruka said triumphantly.

“Well yeah, I agree that Mom is not really the type to think things through, and she couldn’t care less if her explanations were not convincing, but the one who came up with the idea first was Miharune, and I wouldn’t put it past Mama to spontaneously decide to follow up on that thought...”

“We are 19 sisters. And what’s more, we are aged from 0 to 19 in a line with one year differences in age and no gaps in between! That a boy was also born in there somehow, wouldn’t that be normally impossible?”

“As I said, I too think that it’s not a very well thought out plan...” Hikaru couldn’t understand where Haruka was going with this.

“Mama surely said something so out of ordinary because he really *is* our real brother! If you think about it, a lot of things come to mind. First of all, his name— Taiyou!”

It’s Youtarou... Hikaru didn’t have the energy to correct her aloud anymore.

“Us sister’s names are, from the top: Miharune, Mizore, Haruka, Hikaru, Hotaru, Tsurara, Rikka, Kosame, Urara, Seika, Yuuna, Fubuki, Watayuki, Mari, Mizuki, Sakura, Nijiko, Sora, and Asahi. All of our names have something to do with the weather or the seasons, right? And then, there comes along a boy, our brother with a name that means ‘The Sun’! Just with that connection, don’t you feel like this the work of fate? Kyun~!

This is bad. Haruka has entered her Kyun Kyun mode...

“And hearing your side of the story, I still think that no matter how reckless Mama may be, she wouldn’t say ‘OK!’ to us living together with him so easily. Because, you know, we have so many cute girls here!”

Certainly, that had struck Hikaru as a little weird as well.

“And also, does Hikaru-chan know about Papa’s family?”

“No, because I don’t have any interest in such things, at all...”

“But you do know that Papa is from a big old family, right?”

“Yeah well, I know that much, I guess. Papa was the next heir of his family, but Mama was also the heir of our Amatsuka family. That is why their marriage was opposed so they reluctantly chose to both retain their family names and have a commuter marriage. It seems that they still meet outside often, but since Mama is busy with work these days and rarely comes home, we don’t meet him. But even if both of our parents are absent from home, we *are* 19 sisters after

all, and I personally don't really feel lonely." Whenever this topic came up, Hikaru brightly laughed it off.

"That's it!" Haruka raised her finger with vigor as she exclaimed.

"From what Haruka has heard, Papa really loved Mama, but they both also loved their families and treasured them very much as well. So, in the end, they decided to go through with their love for each other while trying to cause as little trouble for others as possible. Kya~! How romantic!"

"Yeah...so?"

"But, the children those two were blessed with were all girls. They had 19 children, and yet, all of them were cute girls." Haruka was completely absorbed in her role of amateur detective and her hands were flying all over the place.

"Well, they were blessed with girls, and it wasn't exactly something they had control over, right?"

"Geez, Hikaru-chan, you're so pure. Of course, Haruka also thinks the fact that all their children were girls was only a coincidence. But, have you ever thought why Mama wanted to have 19 kids in the first place? I heard it was because she was a Christian and was inspired by the movie 'Sound of Music', but for just that reason 19 kids are too much. You should have wondered about it once or twice too, Hikaru-chan."

True enough, Hikaru had thought about it once or twice. You would be hard pressed to find 19 sisters...

"So, keeping in mind the reason Mama and Papa couldn't officially get married, it makes sense that they would want to have an heir. But, if you think about it, Mama's family owns an entertainment company, and Miharu Onee-chan has already had her debut there as the Morning Weather Lady. Even if it wasn't for that, you would think that any one of us would be good enough to be the heir, since there are so many of us."

Hikaru wouldn't take on the role of the Morning Weather lady even if it meant dying.

"But, Papa's family...I have heard a little about them. If I remember correctly, they live near the sea in a giant mansion and are related to a famous politician...So their heir has to be a boy, no matter what."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" This was the first time Hikaru was hearing about this.

“I think Papa also has a little sister who is quite younger than Papa. For us, she would be our Aunt, I guess? But listen to this. If, just if, Mama did give birth to a boy, what would you think would happen? It’s such a big and influential house. Don’t you think that he would get taken away?”

“That’s absurd. That sounds more and more like...”

“If he really is our true “brother”, then, being the same age as Hikaru-chan, I guess that would make him Hikaru-chan’s twin.”

“!!”

“Well? Did you feel anything...special about him?”

Her face filled with misplaced expectations, the pink-clad Haruka drew her face close to Hikaru.

“Er, what do you mean by...‘special’?”

“Hmm, you know, something special that can’t be understood with words? Maybe...some kind of special bond, or the air around him. You know, something tying you guys together, like the red thread of fate. Haruka thought that maybe you two met because of that special bond, and that caused you to bring him back to us. Bring Taiyou-kun to Haruka’s side...”

Like I said, it’s Youtarou...

“Kya~! What should I do? He is surely our special family member. Oh and not only that, maybe he is the fated prince that Haruka has waited so long for. He will come and sweep me off my feet...”

As Haruka wandered off to the nonsensical world of a maiden, a confused Hikaru was left behind all alone.

At around the same time, one door down the hallway, in the room that was next to the next room in which Haruka was dreaming about her still unseen Prince...

Goooooooo....

Making a surprisingly unpleasant sound, a small toy railway was running. This was a room for three people. The oldest in this room was the seventh daughter, Rikka, a Middle-school freshman, and after her the eighth, the Elementary-school 6th Year Kosame. A Shounan⁸ was crawling around the room at full speed on little blue railway tracks. The third person in the room was the ninth daughter, the Elementary-school 5th Year Urara, who was staring at Shinjuku Line's double decker railway car.

Kosame had been sitting at the table and doing her homework. She breathed a sigh of relief and closed her notebook. As she pushed back her chair to stand up, *gachagacha*, the elevated bridge that Urara had constructed fell to pieces. It seemed that before she knew it, Urara had spread had her model railway track all the way under the chair Kosame had been sitting on. The house that the 19 sisters lived in was a grand mansion built on a huge site in the mountains, but no matter how large the house, it was still a 3 person room.

"Ahh! My E231 System!"

"Ah! I-I'm really sorry!" Kosame was not at fault, but she apologized anyway. Urara was in 5th grade already, and she knew that fussing over such a little thing was embarrassing, but she couldn't help herself. Rikka, who had been lying on the bed reading a teen's magazine, suddenly jumped up, as her small miniskirt tried it's best to keep her panties hidden.

"Whoa! This is really bad! I guess Rikka really did mess up her Christmas present request to Santa-san. I guess I should have requested the power-stone written about in this book. Just look at this! "If you wear it, a fated encounter between you and your first love is just waiting to happen"!"

Ha?

Kosame and Urara both stopped what they were doing. Urara, who had been rubbing her eyes until then, regained her usual calm composure and her cool smile.

"Rikka-chan, today is Christmas day already, and you are still thinking about your Christmas present request?" *Are you and idiot, it's not like Santa really exists*— Urara, remembering the

⁸ Name of a railway car.

presence of Kosame besides her who had become excited, swallowed the words that were about to spill from her mouth. “Santa Claus has probably put Rikka-chan’s present in a bag a long time ago and is probably heading to Japan right now! That’s why he can’t accept a present change request any longer.”

Talking to Rikka, who was two years older than Urara and still believed in the existence of Santa Claus, Urara couldn’t help the fact that some amount of irritation got mixed in her voice. Although it was nothing unusual, Rikka was acting pretty nonchalant, especially considering that Urara had been seriously planning to run away from home in the morning, after hearing something from Miharu Ane-sama that shook her to her very roots.

“That’s right Rikka-chan. Asking Santa-san for a request change this late would only cause trouble for him. And besides, it’s too early for us to have an encounter with our first love...” Kosame said timidly, as she played around with the ends of her long plain braids. As she said it, her face got red. And then she remembered her own request. On December 1st, while making an Advent Calendar⁹, she also wrote a letter to Santa Claus with her little sisters. Her wish in that letter was: “Please give me a ‘Nezunaika Tales’”. It was a somewhat childish, and she was bit worried about that herself. Waving around her long, straight and shiny hair, Urara snorted and interrupted.

“Anyways, it’s stupid. It’s not like the power-stone is actually gonna do anything. And besides, Rikka-chan doesn’t need the help of a power-stone; she can make a boyfriend whenever she wants. She doesn’t have to ask Santa-san, she can experience her fated encounter just fine on her own if she was to get serious...If she can really stand that filthy creature known as a man!”

Ahh, I really, really, really hate men! Urara thought with a shudder. Both Rikka-chan and Haruka Ane-sama often said things like “First love” and “Boyfriend” and “My prince” happily, but Urara could never understand. What was so good about men anyway? The creatures known as men were just smelly, dirty and filthy. They should never be approached, let alone touching them! If she had to go through that, she would much rather go to a nunnery. This was Urara’s thinking. And in the house in which this androphobic girl lived, a boy that went to the same school as Hikaru Ane-sama was coming to live, according to Miharu Ane-sama. When she heard this, she was certain she was going to faint.

It’s impossible.

⁹ For those who don’t know, (like me) an Advent Calendar is a calendar made at the start of December to count the day till Christmas.



She had been thinking the same thing ever since she heard the news in the morning. But it was Miharu Ane-sama who had told her. Knowing about her dislike for men, Miharu Ane-sama was the only one who had pushed to arrange for her to go to an all-girls school. That Miharu Ane-sama had told her. Urara remembered the conversation she had in the kitchen.

“Not ‘a guy’. It’s ‘Onii-chan’. He’s our family. Until now, because of various circumstances, he had been living separately, but he’s Urara-chan’s one and only brother. That’s why he has a right to live in this house as much as you, Urara-chan. You have lived in this house until now, surrounded by your sisters and happiness alike, yes?” Urara thought for a moment, then she nodded in agreement.

“Your brother lived all alone, separated from the rest of his family. Don’t you feel sorry for him? Urara, you are intelligent, so I think you can imagine it, right?” Miharu Ane-sama bent down.

“He was supposed to have been brought up in this house, but that opportunity was taken from him and he grew up all alone, not knowing the joy of having sisters, elder or younger. He knew nothing about this lively environment.” A bit too lively, though Urara cynically, but her chest hurt just a little. Usually, she thought that her family was a little too loud, but if she really did start living alone after this, she would probably be really lonely and disheartened.

“You will accept and face him as your own family, right?” Miharu Ane-sama said as she made a kind face and embraced Urara lightly. When spring came, Urara would be a fifth grader, so she was slightly embarrassed.

“Okay, okay, I got it.” She said, pushing away Miharu. “The most I can promise is that I won’t try to drive him out of the house from the first day.”

“I see! As expected from Urara-chan! I guess that’s right. You have to find love on your own after all. Fufufu! I guess asking Santa-san for a shiny nail set was the right choice after all!”

Facing the taken aback Urara and Kosame, Rikka made a ‘V’ with her fingers.

“Yosh! Let’s go find the Santa-san that is heading this way for Rikka and the others right now!”

Is Rikka-chan really older than me? Urara often wondered...

Again at the same time, the 5th daughter Hotaru who was a Middle-school 3rd Year was working in the kitchen. She was making a cake for tonight's party. The cake was for 19 sisters— no, for 20 siblings. A huge, *huge* Christmas cake.

Outside, it was cold winter, but inside the tidy and clean kitchen, it was pretty warm, and steam was rising from here and there. The large ribbon that was binding her shoulder length bob-hair was swinging in rhythm to Hotaru's humming.

Since it was Christmas, and because it was easy to cut and divide, she had decided to make a Bush de Noel. It was a pretty unusual cake, shaped like a tree log, and was quite particular to Christmas. Its normal color was a pretty orthodox chocolate color, but since today was a special day, Hotaru was thinking of making it white using white chocolate.

On the base dough that was made with fresh eggs and really sweet but still just a bit bitter cocoa, she spread lots of freshly made fluffy cream. Then, retrieving the berries that looked like small rubies from the sink, she sprinkled them on the cake here and there. So that the soft dough would not break, she slowly and gently rolled it up. After rolling up the dough, she cut off around a 3 centimeter piece from its end. To make sure that the cake does not collapse, she had to be most careful around here. She set the cut-off piece on its side so that the spiral pattern of the inside of the log-like cake could be seen clearly.

Yes, success! She thought. She carefully put the cut off piece on top of the roll. She was pleased, and put the dough that had collapsed just a little into the oven.

Yup, bitter and delicious. All that was left was to melt the white chocolate on hot water, and mix it with the cream to make a white chocolate ganache cream, and apply that for the decoration. Spread a bit of shaved chocolate and silver dragee over the cake, and she was done.

In the morning, Hotaru had been surprised when Miharuru and the rest had broken the news to her. But she got used to the fact so quickly that it surprised even herself.

We are already nineteen people. So what if one more person came along? Hotaru was okay with that. Right now, her feeling of wanting to meet the "Onii-chan" that was supposed to come along today was just oozing out. Hotaru was aware of this feeling, which was a surprising feeling even for her.

I guess I really have wanted a big brother since a long time ago. Hotaru had a pretty reliable and level headed personality unlike the highly distinctive personalities that her other 18 sisters possessed, and usually she didn't make too much fuss about anything.

Urara, the ninth daughter who got upset easily, often asked *"Why is Hota Ane-sama always smiling when I see her?"* Hotaru thought of it like this. If you were always smiling, you could always be happy. And besides, there was always something going on in this house that made her smile, so if on the rare occasion she *did* get angry, it would not be long before something made her smile again.

I guess I'm not very good at getting angry. Hotaru thought while smiling wryly. Wearing an apron with lots of frills while making a cake for everyone was enough to make her happy. If Urara-chan would put on a similar apron and cat ears for her, it would make her even happier.

"Fufufu." A small chuckle escaped her lips. Her kind, low eyes closed even further.

Hotaru had a cosplay hobby.

That right! If Onii-chan says its fine, I guess I can make a male orientated cosplay costume...I just might be making those from now on! Hotaru's chest began fluttering.

I guess a cool anime character would be fine too, but the first one has to be a sailor uniform! Or, I guess a butler uniform would be good too. I wanted to try that too. Such was Hotaru, who liked cooking and was, together with the third daughter Haruka, in charge of the cooking.

Oh yeah, I wonder what's keeping Haruka-chan. She said she would come help me cook the cake. I wanted her opinion on writing "Welcome Onii-chan" on the baked cake with a pink deco pen, if there is any room left...

“Happy Lucky Honeymoon ♪ O mirror of Yuuna’s humble heart, show me the face of my dear brother~!” The one wearing a small skirt and making its frills spin as she herself spun around and around was an Elementary-school 3rd Year, the 11th daughter Yuuna. At her feet was a small heart shaped ‘mirror’ about 5cm in size, made out of cardboard and aluminum foil.

Forgetting her surroundings, Yuuna used her beloved stick of magic to cast a magic beam towards the mirror!

...At least, that was the idea. That was 15 seconds earlier.

Tick tick tick tic- she counted in her heart. Getting tired of waiting, she opened her eyes to take a peek at the mirror before the time was up. Yuuna was not very deft with her hands, and her creation barely reflected light, if anything at all, owing to the wrinkly surface of the aluminum foil.

“Ahh, it didn’t work after all.” *Maybe I shouldn’t have gotten impatient and tried to sneak a peek after all...*she thought a bit remorsefully.

Yuuna’s magic always fails because of small silly mistakes like this. I just wanted to see his face as soon as possible. Yuuna’s one and only Onii-chan. This is the first time Yuuna’s heard that she has a big brother. Just thinking about it made her heart beat faster. And that beat itself, was magic!

...At least, that was the idea.

Yes. As a matter of fact, Yuuna was actually the only descendant of a long line of mages in this house! At least, that was what Yuuna believed in unflinchingly. If Yuuna was a descendant, then wouldn’t that make her other sisters descendants of the same mages too? That line of thought, of course, didn’t cross Yuuna’s pure mind at all. That is because Yuuna was a mage! Her specialty was, of course, the magic that any girl would adore, love magic!

“Eei!” Yuuna, who had been crouching down and peeking into the mirror of magic, stood up and fired herself up.

Once again, unifying my spirit! She clasped her hands in front of her chest and thought: *Show me the face of my still unseen brother! My brother!*

Wearing high-knee socks with bold stripes on them like a candy, she danced around on her toes.

Kuuuu...

Yes! Maybe the real Onii-chan appeared—

“I’m back! Hmm? What are you doing, Yuuna-chan?”

Yuuna was immediately disappointed.

Holding open the door to Yuuna’s room, which was also Fubuki and Seika’s room, was this household’s 10th daughter, Seika.

“I was just doing some magic.” Yuuna replied, inflating her cheeks in a cute way to express her displeasure. Seika was used to this scene and, making sure not to step on the weird thing—mirror that was on the floor, set down the thick books she was carrying on the desk. The top book in that pile of books was Seika’s most treasured book. The book that had been read again and again by many people all over the world, a book that was older than Seika herself, a three volume pale brown book. A book that was hailed as a masterpiece by both male and female readers. ‘The Three Kingdoms’ by Shibata Renzaburou. Her hair was tied up in a bun like a panda, and she was clad in a red and gold mini one piece from China and had a cheerful face. Seika was a huge ‘The Three Kingdoms’ fan.

“I see. I’m sorry if I interrupted your magic casting.” Seika, who was one year older than Yuuna, smoothly got rid of Yuuna’s worries as usual. “I just got back from getting a few books from the basement library. So, Yuuna-chan, I thought a little about what we heard in the morning. Our ‘Onii-chan’, what do you suppose he’s like?” She said, while gazing up at the ceiling, a bit embarrassed.

“I wonder if he looks like anyone from our family. I just can’t imagine it, since we don’t have any men in our house. That’s why I got to thinking. I guess if he’s like Hikaru-chan, he will resemble the fair skinned Koumei-san. Or he might be even more sturdy and reliable than I imagined like Kanu-sama, since he’s a guy after all. Or, or, who knows? He might be the nice, bright and funny type that would play with us, like Chouhi-sama. Or—” Her cheeks dyed bright pink, Seika was just rambling on and on now. Yuuna interrupted her by saying:

“I know! I know, right? That’s why Yuuna was trying her best to get Onii-chan’s face to appear on the mirror by using her magic...”

“Eh?”

Yuuna explained her actions to her.

“Un. Seika would like to see him too.” Seika smiled wryly. “But, both Miharu Onee-chan and Mizore Onee-chan said that they didn’t have any photos, and we don’t have any other information either. I guess they want to keep it a surprise until we meet him.”

“Yuuna can’t bear it any longer, buuu!” Yuuna stamped her feet on the ground like a child.

“I mean, Yuuna has always wanted a big brother. I’m happy that I have a lot of big and little sisters, but Yuuna feels a bit bored sometimes. All our older sisters are now grown up, so they can do what they want, and the little ones like Sakura-chan and Mizuki-chan are pampered. But Yuuna is the 11th daughter and is in the middle, and no one treats her specially now. If I act a little bit selfishly, I get scolded that I’m the older one and have to be an example to the younger ones. And then, if I think “Okay, I’m the older one” and try to stay up a little late, I get scolded that I’m too young. That’s why, I’ve always wanted an Onii-chan that would be the most kind to me, who would praise me, and listen to anything I have to say, a brother just for me.” Yuuna said, with her face flushed red.

So cute...

At times like this, Seika found Yuuna very cute, but also felt a bit jealous of her.

Yuuna-chan has it great, because she can be so true to her feelings and speak them out loud so easily. Of course, I also yearn for a big brother very much.

Because, much like Yuuna-chan, she was in the middle of the 19 sisters. She was in the 10th place, whether you counted from the bottom or the top. Just with that she had a half-baked position in the family. But not only that, she also had a little sister who was a bit of a natural airhead just one year younger than her, and ever since they were little, she had often looked after Yuuna. That’s why she couldn’t be very straightforward at times like these. In reality, she was also pretty excited about it. The Onii-chan she had always longed for. She didn’t particularly have any rivalry feelings, but she was pretty sure she had longed for an older brother much more than Yuuna-chan. Much like she felt for Ryuubi-sama, Koumei-sama, Shogun Kanu and Shogun Chouhi¹⁰. When she heard that they had a brother for the first time, she didn’t believe it of course. But it’s strange.

It’s got to be a lie! I can’t believe it! This is too unexpected! Even though these kinds of thoughts were swirling in her head, in the depths of her heart...

...was happiness. Just that one feeling was overflowing.

¹⁰ I’m not really sure, but I think these are character from the books she reads, or the Japanese version of the Three Kingdoms maybe?

If it's with Onii-chan, Seika is sure she can talk about her feelings. Seika thought. And it would be nice if, as a little sister, she could teach her Onii-chan something. Her Onii-chan, who had always lived alone, separated from the rest of the family.

“Let's try Yuuna's magic one more time. This time, Seika will also help Yuuna-chan.” Hearing this, Yuuna jumped into the arms of a kindly smiling Seika.

“Really!? Yes! Thanks Seika-chan!! I'm sure it will go well this time, since Seika-chan is helping too. Onii-chan is amazing after all! I wonder if he's handsome.”

The 5th daughter, Tsurara breathed a sigh of relief. The room was full of a heavy, sleepy atmosphere.

“They finally went to sleep...” It was 3 o’clock in the afternoon. Actually, the afternoon nap was supposed to be from 2 to 4 in the afternoon, but since it was a holiday, everyone had been too excited to go to sleep. This was the room of the girls in kindergarten, or simply White Room.

In the calm room where faint sun rays were coming in through the off-white curtains, the 14th daughter Mari, the 15th Mizuki, the 16th Sakura, the 17th Nijiko, and the 18th Sora were taking their afternoon nap. The afternoon nap was part of the daily routine of all the girls in kindergarten, that is, all of the girls younger than the 14th daughter, Mari. Usually, one of the sisters older than Hotaru accompanied the little girls to their afternoon nap on holidays, and Tsurara had almost never done it.

But today was special. It seemed that a big brother was coming today.

Haruka and Hotaru were busy preparing for that, so she had to look after the little ones.

Haaa? A “new brother”? What does that even mean? That’s what Tsurara seriously thought. A big brother, coming into a family afterwards? That’s not possible. Even Mizuki in kindergarten knows that such nonsense only happens in fairy tales. Isn’t it just idiotic? Her abusive thoughts continued. Tsurara was a Middle-school 2nd Year.

They say that one’s name often reveals the personality of the person, and this stood especially true for Tsurara. Her silver hair, as well as her cool outlook and a face that was well-featured more than anyone else in the house, all perfectly reflected her rather sharp personality¹¹. A personality that hated inconsistent and unreasonable things. She was at an age where everybody around her of the same age was always talking about ‘love’ and ‘boyfriends’ or what-not, but in all honesty Tsurara wasn’t very interested in boys. That was partly because the moderately popular Konohana Private Academy that Tsurara went to had been originally a girl’s only school, and had only recently become a co-ed school, so she didn’t have many boys around her. But it was mostly because to Tsurara, boys looked like pretty worthless creatures, let alone potential love partners. They laughed at worthless gags, and they did worthless things like betting their lives on a can of milkshake at lunch time. They read and laughed loudly at worthless manga, and collected worthless cards. Tsurara couldn’t make any sense of it.

¹¹ Tsurara literally means icicle.

How come they can get so serious about such things? I swear men are just worthless beings.

Tsurara was different from Urara, who among the sisters had a severe dislike for men. Tsurara just didn't have enough time to deal with such worthless creatures.

Tsurara was pretty smart. She had done well in her studies ever since she was little.

All she had to was look at a textbook once, and somehow she remembered all of it. Of course, she worked hard too. She didn't hate her studies, and if she got good grades she was praised, which made her happy. And besides, she had gained a goal to work towards in recent years. Ever since Tsurara heard of the illness— her cute sister Watayuki's illness, she dreamed of becoming a medical scientist. Yes, so that she could find a cure for her sister's illness, which was said to be incurable by modern medicine, Tsurara was going to give a test for a special advanced class this February. That class was known for its high level, and if she was able to enroll in that class, her acceptance into a high-class university was pretty much guaranteed. That's how important that test was. If she passed, she would be a special Advance student by April, and would have taken a solid step towards her dream. At such an important time...

"A new brother!"

I said, what does that even mean? I don't have a clue what Miharu Ane-sama and the others are thinking! She thought. *If they really think about me, then they should be a little bit more considerate.*

Dissatisfaction rose in her chest. Tsurara was weak to change. It was like something unknown was going to befall her soon, and it was like she could see the signs of dark clouds forming over her head.

No...

NoNoNo! That's wrong, you idiot! That can't be right at all! She desperately denied it.

Okay then. Even if a "newly made brother" or some idiotic creature like that comes here, I don't care. It has nothing to do with me. That's all I have to think. Fortunately, we have 19 sisters in this house, and I have a lot of little sisters who will become excited and say "Welcome Onii-chan!" Even if I ignore him, I won't stand out much.

Hm. That's right! That population of this house is a bit too much, so all I have to do is to think that a servant is coming. Yes, I will make good use of him. If I think a servant is coming, it doesn't make me so mad either. "A big brother", like I will believe in such a thing!

Finally, the sun setting.

“Is it finally the time for Onii-chan to arrive?” That was the 13th daughter, Watayuki. She looked outside the brightly lit window which had become a shade of dark blue, and said in a slightly nervous voice. As her body was weak, she was sitting the corner of the living room where a special oven-like space had been installed for her. In the center of the room was a huge bed on which Watayuki spent most of her time. Since it was the living room, one or two of her sisters was constantly going in and out, so she didn’t feel particularly lonely.

It’s completely different to when I was in the hospital... She would often think with warm sentiments in her heart towards her sisters.

“The winter solstice of this year is already past, and today sunset will occur at 16:34. His arrival was announced to be around 5:00 PM, so if on time, he should be arriving in another 30 minutes.” Lifting her head, the 12th daughter Fubuki replied, sitting with her back against the end of the bed on which Watayuki lay down, her long hair spreading all over. She had a huge picture book spread out in front of her.

“Ufufu~. It sure is exciting isn’t it? Hey, what do you think he’s like, Fubuki-chan?” As Watayuki asked happily, Fubuki made a troubled face.

“Even if you ask me that, given the lack of information and conditions, for now I have no idea myself. The ones welcoming him to our house are none other than our elder sisters, so I guess that he won’t be too barbaric. That said mutation in the genes is a possibility that always exists. Especially if the characteristics of the male-specific Y chromosome appear, I have no way of knowing what will happen, because that chromosome doesn’t exist in us sisters. What is really interesting is that is if there are any prominent features related to the male-specific hormones, such as testosterone, which is a known cause of aggression, or...”

This time it was Watayuki’s turn to make a troubled face. The two sisters who had received a name with “Snow¹²” in it had this one difference. Fubuki, who was already enrolled in Elementary-school, and Watayuki, who was to be enrolled in 4 months’ time, both had quiet personalities and often spent time together in this room. For Watayuki, it was because she had a weak body and needed to rest as much as possible. And for Fubuki, who was really mature for her age and a little unusual in her thought process, it was because she spent most of her time quietly reading a book.

¹² Fubuki means Snowstorm, and Watayuki means Large Snowflakes.

Fubuki was born with a pale complexion, and her eyes were weak. As if shielding her eyes from the afterglow of the orange sunset that had finally disappeared, she looked outside the window with squinted eyes and whispered. “But still...” All expression disappeared from Fubuki’s pale face. “I wonder what they mean by ‘a new brother’.”

Waving around her soft looking and long mohair-wool-like hair, Watayuki laughed and tilted her small neck. “It means exactly that. As Miharū Onee-chan explained, they found our brother who had been separated from us for all this time...”

Ever since Watayuki had heard of her big brother, she couldn’t help but feel happy and overjoyed. That’s because she also had always wanted a ‘big brother’. Of course, she knew that it was impossible for a bigger brother to come afterwards, so she had given up. But sometimes, the thought came to her unawares. Especially when she was suffering from fever and pain all alone in the middle of the night in the hospital room—

Ahh, if only I had a kind big brother here right now, he would hold my hand and cheer me on. Not only that, but if he would grant my wish, and take me home just like this, how great that would be... Living in the hospital room with nothing to do except read picture books, the Watayuki of that time had somewhere along the way overlapped her own wishes and dreams with that of a ‘Big brother’.

And now, it turned out that Watayuki actually had a big brother she always longed for. And one that was going to live with them in this house from now on. And she also thought her brother pretty pitiable, since they were supposed to have lived together in this house, but only he had been separated from all of them, all alone. *Ah, my poor, poor Onii-chan. I’m sure I’m the one who understands his feelings the most! Because— because I too experienced it when I was in the hospital, all alone. I even had a home and family that was always wishing for my return, Onii-chan didn’t even have that.*

Watayuki knew. Probably more than any of her sisters, she knew how hard and lonely it was being all alone. She knew that the sadness of being alone was sometimes so much that tears would involuntary start spilling from her eyes.

That’s why, when Onii-chan comes home, I’ll be as kind and cheerful as I can. Watayuki vowed in her heart. She had overcome her disease, and came home safely in this restful state and had been treated kindly by all of her sisters. This time, it was her turn to treat her brother kindly and cheer him up.

“Fufufu~.” Watayuki was very happy that she had found something that even she could do.



“But, that person...is he really our sibling?” Fubuki said suddenly.

Eh? What was this about?

“I ran the simulation many times, but for us sisters the chance of a brother —or any other sibling for that fact— existing is close to zero.” Fubuki placed a finger on her forehead and continued. “We are all a total of 19 sisters, with 1 year gap between us all. That alone is pretty abnormal, but considering the reproduction system of mammals, that isn’t too improbable. But there is no more room for another sibling to be born between us. If he was older than Miharu-nee, I would understand that, but for him to be the same as age as Hikaru-nee...” Suddenly, her movements stopped, as if a switch had been turned off.

“Fu-Fubuki-chan?”

“I apologize. The possibilities amount to three.” Fubuki regained her movement, and continued with her normal expression.

“The first possibility: That he is the twin brother of Hikaru-nee. The second possibility: That the fact that he is our brother of the same age as Hikaru-nee is a mistake of some sort. The third possibility: The person named Hikaru-nee is...”

Fubuki stopped subtly at the last one. Watayuki didn’t understand so she ended up asking.

“What does that—?”

“The fact that someone from within us sisters is not our real sister...”

The room became silent. And then, the second daughter, Mizore walked in.

“Ahh, Fubuki, so this is where you were.” Seemingly having returned from where ever she had gone, she set down the cloak she had been wearing from her shoulder, and slicked back her short-cut hair.

“Finally, he is here.” She said as she grinned.

Youtarou was standing before a gate.

It's huge!

He was standing in front of a house that was bigger than anything he had imagined. He had heard that the site of the house was unbelievably huge. Youtarou couldn't imagine an area larger than 150 to 300 square meters. A normal 4.5 tatami room measured about 3 square meters. This was in a different league altogether. Was this really a house? The Amatsuka house looked like some kind of tourist attraction rather than a house for living in.

"What's wrong?" Hikaru asked peering at his face filled with disbelief.

After cleaning up the room, Hikaru had left Haruka at the kitchen so that she could help Hotaru and came to the gate to wait for Youtarou.

"Ah...ahh..." *What should I say?* "I was a little surprised, is all..." Somehow he got those words out. On the other side of the gate, there was a path leading up to the façade. Thinking about what was waiting for him at the end of that path made him a little squeamish. All he had heard was that there were 'a lot' of sisters. Just by looking at this mansion, he could imagine what kind of luxurious lives they lead. Would they really accept him? His nervousness was increasing by the second. He heard a small voice at his side.

"Don't think about unnecessary things, you idiot." He felt a push at his back. "Let's go!"

The impatient looking Hikaru forcefully pulled him along by the arm. The heavy looking gate slid apart without a sound. Like Moses parting the sea. And then it slid closed without a sound behind them. The sea that had been split apart became flooded with water, and there was no going back now.

The gate is electric operated...Being rich sure is great.

Early that morning, Hikaru had visited Youtarou in his apartment, and had helped him pack his belongings.

His apartment was a 2DK¹³, and was in a seedy building that looked like it had been built in the 1950s. He had told her that she didn't have to come in, but she had quickly entered without saying anything, and had busily started packing his things on her own. It seemed like she didn't like the room's untidy look one bit. *Carry only what is absolutely necessary, and put the things that can be delivered later into a box*, she said as she started piling things from the shelf and other crap into the cardboard box without giving them a second glance.

Meanwhile Youtarou somehow found the sports bag he had used for his school trip, and avoiding Hikaru's line of sight, turned his back and quickly started packing things he didn't want Hikaru to touch, such as his clothes or underwear. When Hikaru saw him packing things such as a bath towel and a shampoo, she interrupted him.

"You're not going on trip, so there is no need for that. You can use the ones at our house. Also, it's winter vacation from today, so you can leave your school things here too. You don't look at your books during vacation anyway, right?" Hikaru laughed in amusement.

Oh yeah, this is not a trip...

Looking over the room, Youtarou's shoulders drooped a bit. Looking at the album that was lying on the floor, Youtarou thought: *From tomorrow on— no, from tonight, a different life is waiting for me. If I think about it carefully, the memories of everything in this room are something I want to hold close as I live*. His gaze naturally fell on the impromptu altar that was placed on top of the Japanese chest of drawers. Grandma's portrait smiled back at him.

Youtarou was going to leave this house for good. For some reason, he felt a little remorseful. It was too sudden a development. But even if he stayed in the house, it wasn't like Grandma was going to come back.

"She seems like a kind Grandmother." Hikaru said.

"Un." He replied. "I had lost my parents really early, so she was really affectionate with me..." His voice wavered. *This is bad. Don't cry, me*. "She was a really great person." Saying that he turned his back to Hikaru, and pressed down on the inner corner of his eyes. *Don't. Don't look this way*.

¹³ 2DK means an apartment with a dining kitchen and two rooms.

And then...He felt a soft sensation, and his back suddenly became warm.

"It must have been hard." He was being hugged. Hikaru hugged Youtarou tightly from behind, as if she was holding a small boy in her arms. Her voice seemed awfully close. "I also wanted to meet your Grandmother." Her warm words passed through her chest and reverberated warmly. Youtarou became nervous thinking that Hikaru could hear his heartbeat.

"If I was your Grandmother, I'm sure I wouldn't have wanted to leave you all alone and go somewhere."

And then, for a while, both of them became silent.

For a moment he hesitated, and then saying "Sorry, I'm alright now!" he quickly rubbed his eyes, and freed himself from Hikaru's arms that were wound tightly around him. Hikaru held her body still. Her eyes held sympathy, and she approached him.

Th-This feels bad. After the events of yesterday, Youtarou couldn't predict the behavior of the overly defenseless Hikaru. She was approaching him from the front now.

Is this... Hikaru brought her face close.

Is this... And then she silently placed her hand on his chin.

I-If this continues, I might get kissed. As Youtarou reflexively jumped back, Hikaru said: "A beard grows on men after all". Still staring at his chin, Hikaru continued. "You might want to put a shaving kit in your bag, because we don't have one at home." And then, she laughed as if she was relieved at having noticed that important bit.

Haaa... Youtarou sighed.

He got a premonition of many difficulties ahead.

Crossing the path through the front yard, they reached the front door on which a small board was hanging. On it the words “WELCOME TO YOUR HOME” were written in pale pink ink, and colorful flowers made with lace ribbons and thin paper were attached to it, along with hand-painted bears, pandas and elephants.

Youtarou was fidgeting. It was finally time to see what was on the other side of the door. He suddenly became unable to relax. Hikaru tapped Youtarou’s shoulder.

“It’s gonna be fine. It’s not like there’s anything scary in there.”

I’m not really scared, it’s just— Okay, I am scared. I’m freaking out, actually. Youtarou swallowed the saliva that had gathered in his mouth. As soon as he placed his hand on the double doors, the door opened inwards.

Panpanpaaan! The crackers went off with loud sounds.

“Welcome back, our Onii-chan! Thank you very much for returning to us!” The unanimous shouting of the cute girls resounded. Through all the cheering and confetti dancing through the air, he couldn’t see in front of him clearly.

“Well then, to celebrate Onii-chan’s return, I’ll sing a song!” The descendant of mages, the 11th daughter Yuuna cleared her throat. “One, two...!”

♪ Today is the day Onii-chan came home

Let’s all get together and say congrats

It’s a happy, happy, happy day

Let’s all clap a few times! ♪

Everyone clapped their hands along with the song, and then one by one came forward and endless self-introductions suddenly began.

“First, the eldest daughter, Miharu. I work as a Weather Reporter.” *Ah, it’s the person that was with Hikaru last night at the Entertainment Company.* Her kind aura and soft looking hair were the same as they were the last time they met.

“The second daughter, Mizore. You and I are both dust of the same Universe, so let’s get along.” Mizore, with her short-cut hair and grownup atmosphere, spoke a little brusquely.

“Third, the cooking in-charge, Haruka! Welcome, our Ouji-sama-Kyun! ♥”

Holding the hem of her long skirt Haruka bowed like she was on the stage, and looked very girlish. The pink one piece and the frilly apron she was wearing suited her perfectly.

“Four, the fourth daughter, Hikaru.” Hikaru had not clapped along with the rhythm of the song at all, and she just said what she had to. As soon as they had entered the house, it had seemed like her smile had decreased a little, and it seemed pretty surprising to Youtarou.

“Fifth, also in charge of cooking, Hotaru! I’m very happy to have met Onii-chan.” This time it was Hotaru. She had a large ribbon tied on top of her bob-hair, was fair-skinned, and had soft looking cheeks.

“Sixth— Er, skipping that, Seven! The always energetic Rikka!” She spun around once, causing her mini-skirt to flutter. *Bakyun!* She took a pose and shot Youtarou with her finger.

It was one colorful girl after another.

What was this?

Was his ‘Sound of Music’?

Or was it ‘Do-Re-Mi Song’?

The movie he had seen during the music class came back to him. Youtarou became a little dizzy. His vision became hazy.

Ah. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t eaten any breakfast because he was in a hurry. And he hadn’t had any lunch either because he was busy packing his stuff.

And then, once again in two days, Youtarou collapsed, covered in golden cheers. As his consciousness faded, he felt a kind of soft and bouncy feeling, but for better or worse, Youtarou had no memory of that particular moment. But, when he woke up this time, he felt that that before anything else he just had to eat something, and was taken to the dining hall so huge he couldn’t even have imagined it before, where a welcome party was being held.

“Haaa~.”

He had meant it to be a small sigh, but his voice echoed and caused Youtarou to panic. He glanced around and checked his surroundings. Phew, there was nobody around. But he felt a bit unnerved anyways. One couldn't blame him, he was completely naked. He looked down, and checked his weak-looking body. But he had to be naked in a bath, right?

Youtarou was in the bathroom. The bathroom of this house was huge. The bath tub, if it could be called that, was the size a small inn would have. There were three showers attached. To Youtarou, it was like the sea. Although being in such a grand bath felt good, he just couldn't calm down.

Isn't it a little too big to enter alone? The thought entered Youtarou's head without warning, and he hurriedly got rid of it. *No no no no. Taking a bath alone is the best.*

“Haaa~.” This time he went all out and sighed loudly. And then with a splash he jumped backwards and sprawled on his back in the bath.

You can't do this in a public house bath after all. Steam rose from the huge bath. *Ahh that was a long Welcome Party.* One girl after another had kept popping out. Even so, 19 sisters. As he had heard before, they really were “enough to sell”. He remembered the scene from the party. Since Youtarou had only seen Hikaru before that, it was a pretty shocking scene.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19. Even counting them on his fingers took so long.

When they were lined up in a line, there was no other way to describe it as except as spectacular. But when the party started and they all jumbled together...It was overwhelming. They were even livelier than he had ever imagined the sisters of Hikaru to be, and the overwhelmed Youtarou had honestly not been able to even comprehend all of them when he first met them. Especially the younger ones were all colorful and unique, very impressive children.

For example, the girl who was known as the reincarnation of Marie Antoinette, the 14th daughter Mari, or the girl that was said to be able to see the aura of people, the 15th daughter Mizuki, clad in a traditional Shrine-maiden dress. There was also the timid cry baby, the 16th daughter Sakura, the precocious 17th daughter Nijiko, the energetic 18th daughter Sora who looked like she had come out from ‘My Neighbor Totoro’, and finally the round, baby daughter who couldn't even stand yet, Asahi.

But to be honest, Youtarou was feeling like he had been finally freed. From attending the party he had fully realized that he was welcome here, but between the cheers, the cake, the songs, the self-introductions...It had all felt like a flood really, and he didn't remember much of it.

He stretched one more time in the hot water. And then he realized. *Oh yeah, I guess they need a bath room this big because usually a few of them would enter together.*

All 19 sister. Even if they divided up into groups of 4, that would still be 5 groups. And even if 1 group took 30 minutes that would be total bath time of 2 and a half hours.

“.....”

That's amazing! A huge family is amazing! Youtarou felt a great weight on his shoulders after realizing this bit of information, and dipped the lower part of his face into the water. It was plain fun to breathe out and watch as bubbles come out of his nose.

It was at that time.

Kararara. A light sound came from the door as someone entered the bathroom. Youtarou's back stiffened.

Th-this situation is...! Suppressing the urge to see who had entered, he stealthily turned his back towards the entrance.

It'll be troubling for the person if they are seen before they see me. The intruder still hadn't noticed his presence. Now he could hear the shower being turned on.

This is bad.

This is very bad.

Panicking, Youtarou quickly started thinking about the family members who had a possibility of coming into the bath at this time. The smaller children seemed like they had already taken a bath before the party, so he counted them out. The time now was almost 9 PM.

I guess I can also count out the Elementary-school team too, yes. If that's the case, I think that all the children younger than the lively twin tailed Rikka were in Elementary School, so.

As he was feeling a little relieved that the scope of possible members had become a little narrower, he realized.

The sisters older than that include the moody and strong willed Tsurara —What a befitting name!—, and the kind looking Hotaru who had baked the cake, and then the sweet Haruka-san

whose pink one piece suited her rather too well and who didn't seem older than me at all, and also the mature and cool type Mizore and the eldest Miharuru too! Wouldn't it actually have been less of a problem if it was a younger sister?

And then he thought: *Problem? Wait, if I think about it carefully, isn't the fact that I'm taking a bath here a problem in itself? Ahh, what did I do to get myself into this predicament?*

As he was thinking these useless thoughts, the sound of the shower stopped.

Crap. She's coming. What do I do!? Even if he thought that, there was almost nothing he could do. In that moment, all he could think about was that he could somehow remain hidden in the steam rising from the hot water.

But something like that won't work like it does in a manga—

"Who's there!?" A sharp voice rang through the bathroom.

It's over.

He stood up noisily from the hot water, and keeping his red face downcast and his back to the person behind him, he said hurriedly: "I'm-I'm sorry. I was earlier told by Mizore-san that it was almost time for the bath to be empty, so I could go ahead and enter, so..."

I think that was a good enough excuse, even for me.

"Oh what? It's just you."

Eh? *Get out!!!*...That's what he had been expecting to hear. But this voice was clearly relieved. The owner of the voice even entered into tub.

"I see you were deceived by Mizore-nee. *Kukuku.*" It seemed like whomever it was found this really funny and snorted. The owner of that voice was...

"You don't have to be that stiff. You can turn around." It was Hikaru. He stiffened some more.

"N-no, well, even if you tell me to turn around..."

"Ah. Oh yeah, sorry. Well, I am covering my front for what's it worth...Well, you can remain turned away then." She said, seemingly without a care.

I'm glad that she is at least a little bit self-aware. For some reason, Youtarou was relieved.

"I'm always running at this time." He didn't understand her sudden words. "No, well, it's just that I'm jogging or training at this time every day. And after that, I get in the bath to wash of

the sweat. So Mizore-nee probably forgot about that..." As Hikaru moved, he could hear the sound of water churning. "Or she remembered and planned this to happen..."

She planned it!?

Kukuku. Hikaru snorted again, as if she couldn't hold it back.

"She looks aloof, but she has surprisingly mischievous side to her. I'm sure she wanted to see your troubled expression."

Ah, there's such a troublesome person in this house!?

Youtarou recalled the face of the second daughter Mizore that he had just met in the corridor earlier. With her short-cut hair and calm demeanor, which was refreshing, she seemed very easy to talk with. If he remembered correctly, during her self-introduction, she had said: "You and I both are just fleeting particles of dust in this universe, so as particles of dust more meaningless than grains of sand, let's get along." Hearing that, he had been a bit surprised. But in this house full of gorgeous girls, he had felt that she was relatively easier to approach. That's why when he was on his way back to his room, and she had called out to him and worried about his bath, he had felt a bit happy. At that time, the reliable Hikaru had disappeared somewhere.

"Nobody has shown you around yet? Sorry about that, I was sure Hikaru had...Hm. That's right. It's the right time, so you can go ahead and use the bath. Today was tiring wasn't it? I'm sure you can relax in there."

I wonder if I don't have what it takes to judge people. As Youtarou was standing around depressed, hot water splashed on his bottom.

"Don't just stand around, get in again. Isn't your butt cold?"

B-Butt? Ah!

He panicked and threw himself in the tub. Because of that, a wave rose in the tub.

"Bubuhu, idiot, don't sit with such force— gohohohohu!!" Hikaru began choking.



“Ah! S-Sorry!” He was worried about her, and turned back without thinking. What came floating into his vision, was the image of Hikaru surrounded by white, soft looking steam. Her long hair was wet with water and swept to one side, while her body was...

Are you alright? The hand he had reached out to her stopped in midair. In front of his fingers was the choking Hikaru’s white body. With all the steam flying around, he couldn’t see very well, but the towel that was supposed to have been covering her front was now swimming in the water.

Uwaah! At this rate, I’m going to see everything! While coughing, Hikaru stretched out her hand as if she was asking for help. Coughing, she had left her body defenseless. Hearing her cough that hard, Youtarou also became panicked.

What should I do? Do I help her? But if I do that...!

His body wouldn’t move. His head was spinning again.

“Gohou! Eh!? Youtarou!?” As Hikaru cried out, there was a huge splash and that sound was the last thing that remained in his mind.

“Really, I think this guy has a bad habit of falling unconscious whenever he sees my face.” Hikaru said, looking at Youtarou’s face. Trying her best not to look anywhere improper, she had somehow dragged Youtarou out from the tub, and rolled him to the sofa of the undressing room. She gently set a wet towel on his forehead.

I thought it was such a great opportunity, I could ask him all about what he thought of our family... She thought, a bit lonely. There was a huge bath towel covering Youtarou’s body. Hikaru herself was also wearing a bath towel.

She remembered today’s welcome party. As per Mama and Miharu-nee’s plan, introducing Youtarou as a long lost brother was a success. Sakura and Watayuki for example, and all other younger sisters had always admired the older brother figure, were from the start in “Youtarou Most Welcome” mode, but not only them but also some of the older ones, such as Rikka, who would soon be in Middle-school, Hotaru and even Haruka, who was the third daughter, seemed like they all had lots of love for Youtarou. For all that, Hikaru was relived.

But, she was somehow discontented, something that she could not express in words.

After seeing Miharu introduce Youtarou to everyone.

After seeing Miharuru force Urara to participate in the cheer, Urara who had started treating Youtarou like a manservant.

After seeing Hotaru and Haruka aggressively but happily taking care of all of Youtarou's eating needs.

Even though she was the one who had brought him here.

Even though she was supposed to be special to him, even among all her other sisters.

Of course, those cries within her heart were too faint for even Hikaru herself to hear. That's why right now, all alone with Youtarou, looking at his face, she felt a bit at ease. A smile came to her lips naturally. "Fufufu~."

She gently wiped the small beads of sweat that appeared on Youtarou's face. He was really popular with the younger ones and had been made to play all sorts of games with them at the party, so he hadn't spoken much. Well, that was fine too.

Hikaru had a simple personality. She talked to Youtarou within her heart. In this house with 19 sisters, she had always felt that there was a need for an elder son. But today, that feeling had been confirmed.

I guess I can't fulfill that role after all. No matter how strong I become, no matter how much I train my body. Everyone, all of them, they didn't want a boyish sister like me. Not a half-baked person like me, but a real, genuine brother, that's what they wanted. That's why, I'm glad you are here. For some reason, as soon as I saw your face, I knew this is how things were going to turn out. What do they call this, fate? It's just like Haruka said. Maybe you are the real elder son of this house. If that were the case, then I...

At that, she fell in thought. *Am I just trying to pass on my duty?* But the simple minded Hikaru couldn't really make sense of what that implied.

Well, I guess it's all going to be fine. I better bring some cold water. Hikaru, who had dressed, got up. As she opened the door to go to the kitchen, she found Mizore standing in the corridor, grinning.

"Something happen?" She asked.

"Youtarou collapsed in the hot water, so I was going to go get him some water."

"I see. In the hot water." Mizore loosened her mouth.

"Mizore-nee?" Hikaru asked.

“What is it?”

“Did you know that I was going jogging today—?”

“Ahh, now that you mention it, I totally forgot about that. Did you meet Youtarou in the bath? Did something interesting— I mean, troublesome happen?”

“Uh-un. Nothing much.” Hikaru’s reply was a little too quick.

“That’s good then.” Mizore peeked inside the dressing room. “Ah, he’s completely out of it, isn’t he?”

“That’s right. I can’t carry him all alone.”

“I’ll help too. He’s probably tired, so let’s let him sleep for today.”

“Ah, but I’m worried that he’ll become dehydrated like this. He doesn’t seem very nourished to begin with.”

“I see. So the water first then.”

“I’ll go get some.”

“Hm.”

Hikaru headed off to the kitchen after that conversation. Mizore watched her with an amused face as she went. Mizore was a believer of Armageddon, and in front of The End of the Universe, nothing had much more value than space dust. But, watching those small particles clash with one another like electrons in a small box was quite entertaining nonetheless.

Chapter 3 - Catcher in the Family

16

February 6th.

Around a month and a half had passed since Youtarou had arrived at the Amatsuka household. He was finally getting used to the presence of the 19 sisters. In such a big household, every day was as bright and busy as a party. Little by little, he was gaining back the peace of everyday life. Youtarou had avoided the fate of dropping out in the middle of his school term, and was going back to school as soon as the new semester started.

Give me back my solemn resolution that I made when I thought it was the last of my school days on that December day! Is what Youtarou sometimes thought. Of course, getting to graduate was a lot better than dropping out in the last semester of the last year in Middle-school, and Youtarou had no complaints. In the end, he didn't find any trace of Grandma's bankbook or last will from among his belongings, so his tuition was of course being covered by the Amatsuka family. Of course, he had tried to decline, but it was 'a situation where he couldn't decline the kindness being offered to him' is what Miharu had told him as a 'message from Mama'.

“‘Its fine, its fine, since you are already my own cute son!’”

No, no, that feels wrong no matter how you look at it. Miharu winked at him and continued with the message: “‘When you grow up, join up with our company, and pay me back with your body by becoming part of a star squadron of handsome guys. Of course, the color of the protagonist is red! Always!’”

No matter how much I grow up, I kinda don't have the confidence to become part of a star squadron of handsome guys...

But Youtarou had become so used to his new environment that he could now laugh while nodding at the jokes of this 'Mama' that reminded him of his own Grandma.

Then I guess I'll let myself be spoiled on the basis of my future success... That he had become able to think like this was probably not just because this family was rich. No. What was the best way to describe it? He had been supposed to have been penniless, without any family. But this family had such bottomless brightness that it did not let him feel any guilt.

The big and loud welcome party with all 19 sisters.

The New Year's Eve.

The New Year's Day.

In this family, there was nary a dark day. Youtarou, who had not before lived with sisters or anyone else except Grandma, had no idea. He had no idea that the creatures known as girls could be so bright, so cute, so kind and graceful, so...*dazzling* that it became hard for him to look away. Looking at them, and being called "Onii-chan" by them, Youtarou could feel from the bottom of his heart: *Ahh, It really is okay for me to be here.* He didn't know the reason why. Probably because it wasn't related to logic. Youtarou found out for the first time that the existence of girls couldn't be explained with logic.

Then his school started, and Youtarou's lifestyle became calmer. Because he had to take a 30 minute train to his school all alone, he was the first one up and out of the house, excluding Miharu, who had to leave even earlier because of her weather news job. By the time he returned, it was almost 5 in the evening.

He was then pestered by Yuuna or Seika to help them with their homework, or held on to by Sakura and Mari as they asked him to play with them, or surrounded by Nijiko and Sora as he read a book to Watayuki, and in no time at all it was time for dinner. It was a surprisingly calm and regular lifestyle.

But for some reason, that particular morning was very noisy.

Youtarou had just finished eating breakfast, and was getting ready to leave for school. He could sense the buzz of activity in the dining room even from the corridor. Glancing at his hairstyle in the full-sized mirror on the wall, he began to search for his shoes at the entrance. He heard the sound of small slippers behind him. It was Haruka.

“Ahh, wait a bit.” *What could it be?* “Here you go!”

In her hand was a fork, and on its end was a boiled carrot cut in a heart shape.

“I’m very sorry. I forgot to put just Ouji-sama’s¹⁴ share in his salad today.” Even though her words were apologetic, she seemed awfully happy.

Youtarou recalled the breakfast’s menu: Bacon and sliced tomatoes, omelet with lots of butter and chopped onions, salad comprised of potato and watercress, and sausages marked with browning. Delicious smelling freshly baked bread, lots of milk coffee, and chilled sweet strawberries to top it all off. Come to think of it, he had thought that it was rather colorless salad.

“Here, say aahn!” Haruka raised the fork with the boiled carrot.

We are doing this so early in the morning? Youtarou had become too used to it to think like that anymore. He knew that even if he resisted instinctively it would be useless, so he obediently put it in his mouth.

“Un! Good, good. The child that eats all vegetables without being picky grows into a great adult, you know?” His head was being patted.

“Ah, thanks Haruka...Onee-chan.”

“Iyan~, you don’t have to be so formal, Haruka is happy doing this!” She made an embarrassed face, and suddenly came closer.

“But, I told you didn’t I? Calling me Onee-chan— I don’t like you calling me something so distant. Even if I’m older, it’s just a difference of one year, and as far as Haruka is concerned, you can just call me Haruka, without the need for any honorifics.”

Uwaah! Her face is too close! Even though I finally remembered to put “Onee-chan” on the end...this was a failure.

¹⁴ Ouji-sama means “Prince” or in this case, “my Prince”.

He remembered. The day after the party where he met all the sisters, Youtarou had been called to Miharu's room. There, he had made seven promises with Miharu, Mizore, Haruka and Hikaru so that they could live together as a family.

1: That he wouldn't be reserved.

2: That he wouldn't attach "san" with any of the sister's names.

3: That he would eat all his meals without being picky.

4: That he wouldn't lie.

5: But keeping secrets was apparently OK.

6: That he would participate in all family events.

7: That, as a general rule, he wouldn't let any of the sisters alone into his room. If it was absolutely necessary to let them enter, then only if two or more of them were together.

"Even though we are calling it a 'Promise', it's nothing too hard, right? And these rules are generally followed by everyone in our household, so don't let it bother you too much. I'll let everyone else know later too. Ah, and the rule about the room entry does not mean that we don't trust you, it's just that we have lots of full grown girls in our household too." As Miharu said this and laughed, Haruka was pouting a little for some reason.

"But the fact that I'm a part of this family—" *isn't that a lie too?* Is what he wanted to say, but Mizore cut him off.

"Don't worry about something that is more trivial than the dust of the Universe."

"That's right, and besides, there's always the chance that you really are our brother—" As Haruka was about to complete her sentence with a pink blush, Hikaru interrupted her by poking her in the back.

"Iyan~! Hikaru-chan is being mean!" Haruka started to make a fuss over nothing, and Miharu blocked her out and finalized things.

"In – any – case. As Mama has decided, in front of all five of us, you are from this instant our real brother." Hearing this, Haruka winced and became silent. "You should start believing in this too. You *really* were separated from us at birth, and are our *real* brother. The fact that we

could not live in the same house until now is a shame, but if we keep looking to the past, nothing will start. That's why from now on, let's *really* become a *real* family."

As she was speaking, Miharuru didn't break eye contact with Youtarou even once. Her eyes were filled with conviction, and hearing her made Youtarou feel like it was okay to believe her.

This person surely has a natural talent for hypnotism.

"Since we are going to be living together for a while anyways, isn't a happy and fun live style better for everyone involved? Since we are living under the same roof, it doesn't matter if we are related by blood or not, doesn't matter what anyone says, we are a real family." She stated it with a sense of finality.

As he looked at Hikaru unconsciously, he saw her behind Miharuru with her eyes closed, silently thinking about something as she listened to the conversation.

"But it really is a relief that you are such an honest and nice boy." Miharuru said and laughed.

"Yeah, you are a speck of dust that one feels close to naturally."

Ah, so the dust part doesn't change, huh?

"He is not dust! He is a spectacular prince of Haruka that exceeded her expectations!" Saying that, Haruka attached her to Youtarou's arm with a "Kyun~!"

And then suddenly: "But are you fine with that?" Hikaru asked in a serious tone.

Youtarou thought it over for a moment, while Miharuru smiled gently, Mizore nodded silently, and Haruka sent him a "Of course you are, right?" look while hanging onto him arm.

It was a stifling silence. This was probably his final chance to reverse this whole situation. Youtarou realized with a start that this was the first time he had been clearly asked for his opinion. Without really knowing what she was thinking, he had come this far by just following Hikaru. But was he really fine with this? Of course, a homeless life would not exactly be the most pleasant, but he couldn't say that the situation in this house was normal either. Just because of the reason that he had lost any place to return to, should he be allowed into such a happy family? Or should he find out his own path even if meant facing untold hardships? His head should have been hard at work thinking seriously about these matters. And yet, his body reacted faster. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Hikaru's hand clenched into a fist, trembling slightly.

"Y-Yes." Before he knew it, he was speaking with a light voice. Hikaru drew a breath of relief.

“I’m glad. It’s decided? Then here we go.” Miharū interjected with such speed that Youtarou wouldn’t even have time to change his reply even if he wanted to. She took out a note book. “Suddenly having to add a member to your family is tough business.” It was thick firm looking leather bound notebook. “Let’s begin a family dairy from today!”

“Family dairy?” Mizore asked quizzically.

“Yep. Even if we say that we are ‘family’ now, we sisters add up to 19, and among them the little ones are numerous. I think it’ll be a little difficult for him to talk to everybody, yes? That’s why, one of us will write in this diary one day, and the next day another, and so on. The subject matter will be directed to Youtarou-kun, so that he can understand and get accustomed to us as soon as possible. If you want to term it, I guess it would be a family interchange diary, I guess?”

“Kya~! That’s wonderful!” Haruka exclaimed, her voice rising in excitement.

“So, will we all be writing in it?” Hikaru asked in a confused voice.

“Of course! Even if Hikaru-chan is the great person who brought Youtarou-kun to our home, from now on, I’ll have you sharing him with us all equally from now on, okay? Or wait, maybe you’re jealous because you have to write in the diary along with everyone else? Ufufu~! But even for you Hikaru-chan, getting ahead - is - not - allowed, okay?”

“G-Getting ahead? What idiotic things are you—?”

“Well, Hikaru writing in a diary is more difficult than finding a Supernova in this vast, infinitely boundless universe.” Mizore said while snorting happily.

“We all know how hard it is for Hikaru to write anything in formal style, so I guess this will be good practice. She can think of it as writing a light hearted letter to him, no?” Miharū said while smiling wryly.

“Um, so, what should I be doing...?”

“Ahh, all you have to do is, generally, read the dairy every day. If you felt like it, it would also make us all happy if you wrote down some comments too, but just reading the diary and slowly getting to understand us is good enough. We have some shy girls too, so there might be some things that they cannot directly say to you. However it would be easy for them to write their thoughts down in the diary. Isn’t it a clever method?” Miharū pointed to her head and smiled widely.

Diary entry: 26th December. Plans for winter vacation. [Yuuna, the 10th daughter]

It's going to be a real fun winter vacation. ♡ I'm a little sad that Christmas has ended, but, Yuuna has looooots of things she has to do this winter vacation, so she's like, super excited! What is it that Yuuna wants to do in the winter vacation? Ehehe~♡ That is, to make a magic potion! Winter vacation is smaller than summer vacation, and that's pretty lame. But did you know? In winter vacation, there are lots of pretty red and golden dead leaves around the house garden or the park, and mysterious green jagged leaves too! There are also small red fruits fallen everywhere! Yuuna feels that the forces of magic will be in abundance everywhere! That's why, if she can gather lots of strange things this winter, she feels like she will be able to make a great magic potion. Yuuna is doing her best with research right now! ♡ Hmm? What will the magic potion be for? Even Yuuna doesn't know that! Ehehe~♡ Yuuna will let her precious brother test the very first batch of potion she completes! I'm sure it will have a really, really mysterious effect. ♡ It would be great if the potion can make sparkling powder snow fall on Onii-chan and Yuuna after they take just one sip!

Diary entry: 1st January. Happy New Year. [Haruka, the 3rd daughter]

Happy New Year. Flipping our new calendars to the first month, it's the start of a new year today. This New Years, for the first time, we welcomed a male to our family. ♡ Cool and kind, our one and only Ouji-sama! ♡ In our family, on the morning of New Years, we usually make a Japanese style room by connecting the inner room and the drawing room together, and all 19 sisters gather there in brand new clothes, and drink New Year's sake. This year, our prince was also present there. Ufufu~ Just remembering it now makes me happy. ♡ The seat of the guest of honor in front of the alcove, which is usually occupied by Mama, was this time occupied by Mama carrying Asahi and our Ouji-sama! You two looked like a long married couple. ♡ As the eldest son of our house, of course you were the one who gets the first cup of sake, and the Kimono with the Crest of the family suited you really well. You looked really dignified and reliable. And all of the 19 sisters sat in a circle around you, with their small tables before them, staring at your great figure. Ouji-sama was a little bit nervous, and your hands were shaking just a bit, but when it came to it, you confidently and elegantly drained the first cup. Kyun♡ At that time, I thought: *Ahh, finally, a prince that we all can depend on has appeared. From now on, we sisters are going to live our lives centered on this person.* That's what I really thought. Haruka's heart felt really full to the brim with emotion. *This person is the one that we can depend on, more than anyone else in this world. Our prince that will stay with us forever and*

ever. Our precious prince, who will be a part of our family no matter what happens. Haruka will probably never forget this year's New Year's all her life.

Diary entry: 8th January. Cold Hands [Fubuki, the 12th daughter]

I like the cold weather. When I'm in the cold air, somehow, I feel better. That's why I'm a little bad with summers, and I try not to go to places with strong sunlight. It seems that I'm prone to fainting if my body temperature rises too much. Urara-nee often calls me a poikilothermic¹⁵ and laughs, and I too sometimes think that I am. And no, I don't mean that in a biological sense. I'm also a bit weak in the presence of people. Especially, if I come into contact with people with high temperatures, my head gets all hazy. And sometimes, if my body over-reacts, I faint. That's why I'm a bit bad with children, because they usually have high temperatures. Fortunately, all of my sisters understand my problem. I don't have to have more contact with others than necessary, so this house is a really easy place for me to live in. Even if one of my little sisters suddenly rushes towards me unthinkingly, someone usually picks them up in the way.

But sometimes I think: if the weather is this cold, then I can probably interact with other people physically a bit more. At such times, can I try to come closer to you?

Diary entry: 15th January. Untitled [Urara, the 9th daughter]

I hate men. I really hate them! I don't have any words to speak to a man. I'm going to go ride on the Denentoshi Line today, so stay away from me!

Diary entry: 22nd January. Babuuu! [Asahi, the 19th daughter]

Babuuu! Babuabu. Babuabuabuuuu~!

Kukuku~♡

Daada! Daaadaaaa~!

¹⁵ A poikilothermic organism is an organism whose internal temperature fluctuates considerably.

After being satisfied with Youtarou, who had obediently swallowed his carrot, Haruka reluctantly departed for the kitchen to make breakfast for the other girls. Somehow regaining his composure, Youtarou opened the door to go outside. As he took a step outside, he felt a light impact somewhere around his legs.

“O-ni-i-channn!”

Having run up to him with light footsteps, the one hugging his legs was the 2 year old Nijiko.

“Are you going to come back today?” Holding onto his uniform pants, she raised her head and asked.

“Yes. Of course I’ll come back.”

Her thin, soft, fluffy looking hair was tied up and arranged with a rose shaped hair ornament. *Did Haruka do that for her?* Thinking that, he unconsciously bent down and patted her head.

“Are you going to come back soon?” Nijiko had a bright, honest smile. Her cheeks were so soft. You unconsciously wanted to start rubbing them.

“Well, I’m leaving just now, so I don’t think I can return so soon...” He replied, smiling.

“Then, will you come a little after that?” She asked seriously.

“Umm...” He thought of a way to explain that even a 2 year old would understand. “After Nijiko has eaten her lunch, and has had her nap, then, around the time she is eating her snacks, I’ll come back.”

He squatted down and studied her face. *Did she get it? Or not?* Nijiko had a mysterious look on her face. Then she suddenly smiled.

“Then, Niji doesn’t need her lunch or nap. Niji will be eating her snacks soon!” She said.

“No, that’s not what I meant...” Youtarou smiled wryly.

I guess I still have a long way to go before I can interact properly with the smaller girls. He thought. He had been a single child without any siblings, so it was hard for him to have any meaningful interactions with the older sisters, let alone the younger ones. Nijiko was now making a fuss around his legs.

“Waaiii! Waaiii! I can play with Onii-chan after I finish eating my snacks. I can play with Onii-chan after I finish eating my snacks~♪” She was singing along without a care in the world.

“Ah, no, I mean...what should I say...”

And then suddenly: “Nijiko, don’t go around troubling Anija¹⁶ so much!”

“Ara, Niji-chan. Monopolizing Onii-chan so early in the morning? You’re good! Ufufu~!”

The 15th daughter Mizuki and the 14th daughter Mari had arrived. Mizuki was supposed to have highly sensitive powers of a Shrine-maiden, and was said to be able to see the aura’s of people. She spoke in an old fashioned way, and together with Mari’s haughty queen-like attitude, both of them were quite mysterious to Youtarou. Both of them were wearing uniforms, and were ready to go to kindergarten. Even though they were still in kindergarten, compared to Nijiko, both of them seemed much more levelheaded.

I guess growing up in a big family is different after all. To Youtarou, who was struggling to keep up with just one of Nijiko’s demands, both of them somehow seemed dependable.

“Good girls who don’t eat their lunch and take a nap don’t get to play with Onii-chan.”

“If you are a good girl all day long, I’m sure Anija will also rush back to your side. But if you are a bad girl, instead of a kind Onii-chan, a red demon might come for you.”

Nijiko immediately stopped her dancing, and became read in the face. “N-Niji doesn’t want that. Niji will be a good girl.” Before Youtarou knew it, Nijiko was holding his hand and standing stock-still halfway behind him, her lips trembling.

“That’s right. Nijiko is a good girl after all. That’s why she will be okay!” Mari and Mizuki looked at each other and laughed.

“Well then, hurry up and say your goodbyes to Anija and return to your room.”

“At times like, you have to put on your best princess smile and make a request of Onii-chan to come back as soon as possible.” Mari whispered in Nijiko’s ear.

“Onii-chan, come back soon, okay? Niji will be waiting like a good girl, so come back as soon as Niji finishes eating her snacks.” Nijiko tried her best to smile even while there were tears in her eyes.

How lovably gallant... She was so cute one just wanted hug her. Youtarou gently stroked Nijiko’s cheeks.

“Un. I’ll come back as soon as I can. In fact, I’ll return on the super-express.”

¹⁶ Mizuki talks in an old Japanese style. So Anija is just her saying Onii-chan.

“Yes!”

“Ah, then we too...!” Mari and Mizuki also raised their voices.

“Waaiii! When that time comes, we too will play together with you! I’ll be waiting for you, my beloved Fersen¹⁷!”

“Umu. We will think of what to play till then. Don’t forget about it. It’s a promise!”

Nijiko joined in with the two cheering girls, not really understanding had suddenly happened to the two to make them so excited. Her tears dried up without a trace.

“It’s a promise, if you break it you have to swallow a thousand needles~! Pinky promise~♪”

He was forcefully made to promise. Youtarou left the house after a kiss on the cheek from Nijiko and was seen off by the three waving girls.

“I’m off~!” He said his goodbye properly. This was also a rule of the family.

¹⁷ Fersen, as in, Count Fersen, the alleged lover of Marie Antoinette.

When Youtarou glanced at the clock, it was almost 4 PM, even though he had planned to return really early today. Nijiko's words had stuck with him the whole day, and so he was hurrying back.

I've got to get back soon. Even though winter solstice had long since passed, the winter days were still very short. In a hurry, he almost ran all the way back from the train station. As soon as he opened the door, he saw Nijiko. She had been pacing here and there in the entrance hallway pulling a pink stuffed animal behind her. Her face lit up.

"Onii-chan, you're back!" She immediately ran over to hug him. Youtarou also crouched down to accept her hug. There was nothing left to be said. Rather than siblings, these two felt more like father and daughter. A sweet, candy like smell was coming from Nijiko. Like milk and butter and...

"Today's snack was a hot cake!" Nijiko told him.

Ahh...Is this how being a father feels like?

This new feeling of happiness that he had never experienced before was making his head spin around. He heard loud, flamboyant footsteps from the direction of the corridor.

"Yahoo~! It's Onii-chan! Rikka's classes finished early today!"

"Welcome back, Onii-chan! After this, you have to come with Seika and—"

"Don't leave Yuuna out of it! Let's play with magic!"

It was the miniskirt wearing 7th daughter Rikka, followed closely by the 10th daughter Seika who had hair-dumplings, and the 11th daughter Yuuna bearing a magic stick.

"This is so exciting! With this many of us, we can also play Karuta!"

"Fersen, how good of you to keep your promise. As expected of Mari's Fersen!"

Mizuki and Mari were also present of course.

Why are there so many...? Youtarou was surprised by the number of the people present.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5...6 people. But if he really thought about it, this was a small number, even just among the younger sisters. These were probably the ones that just happened to be there when he came back home. Now that it had come to it, he had no choice.

“Okay then, I guess I’ll play with everyone today!”

Everyone’s faces began shining.

“Then let’s...playyyyy~!” Joining in with the sisters who were shouting in unison, Youtarou pumped his fist in the air. For some reason, whenever he was with these girls, everything became bright and sparkly. Enveloped by this strange sensation, Youtarou barely convinced Yuuna and Mari to go on ahead to the hall with the others while he returned to his own room to change first.

“Like I said! That precious family vase is definitely hidden in the closet of this hall!”

Teaming up in pairs, they had played 3 rounds of “My Neighbor Totoro” Karuta. Rikka, who had become a little bored and had sprawled down on the floor, suddenly extended her arms and legs out straight and going “Gorogorogoro~” rolled across the tatami mat and with a “Dashin~!” collided with the knee of Youtarou who had been sitting cross-legged on the floor. “Crash!” Because her movements were so sudden, Youtarou dropped all the cards he was holding beside a laughing Rikka.

“Oh no!” The earnest Seika hastily began collecting all the cards, and the cool Mizuki also began helping her silently.

“S-Sorry...” Watching all this, Rikka made a ‘not-my-fault’ kind of face and going “Gorogorogoro~” rewound back about 3 times, and attacked again.

Really, now. Are you a kid!? Rikka didn’t seem at all concerned about this secret retort, and was absorbed in her gorogorogoro game.

Oi! I can see your panties... But it seemed like Rikka cared even less about that.

“Here, Onii-chan. I think these are all of them.” Seika handed him all the cards after arranging them. “Ah, thanks.” He smiled kindly.

Seika is a really good girl, with her earnest and honest attitude... Youtarou thought. The girl was in 3rd grade, and the fact that she was a huge fan of ‘The Three Kingdoms’ was a little bit weird, but that fact made her a bit easy to talk to. Instead of really feminine girl, talking to a girl that was a bit more approachable was easier for Youtarou.

Before they knew it, the ‘Battle of the Magic Princess’ had started between the reincarnation of Marie Antoinette: Mari and the descendant of the Great Mages: Yuuna. Youtarou was helped by Seika as he gathered up the cards and put them back in the box as everyone else watched from the sidelines.

Everyone was really gung ho about it at first, but I guess when you are playing with kids, the game can only go up to 3 rounds, yep. He made a note to himself.

“So, that family vase that you were talking about, what exactly is it?” He asked, suddenly remembering the conversation from before. It seemed like that vase was a very precious family vase that was handed down in the Amatsuka family. In this huge Amatsuka house, this

was one of the biggest multipurpose halls of the house, so maybe there was some truth to the words that the vase was housed here somewhere.

The Family Vase. You were drawn in just by hearing about.

“Ah, that is...Um, I think, it really is here somewhere. Even though I have only seen it a few times. It seems like it is an expensive vase that our great-grandmother cherished. But, um, I think, it is not something as mysterious as Rikka-chan is making it out to be...The number of children on in it is wrong too...” Seika said with a troubled face.

It was something like the Amatsuka family heirloom, and was originally in the belonging of the grandmother of Mama, that is, their great-grandmother. It seemed like the vase was white and had a red or green handle, was of a Chinese make, and had a serene painting on it. The painting was of a couple on a backdrop of a calm rural town, and with various children playing here and there. Apparently, in that painting, the current Amatsuka family members were painted.

What the hell is that supposed to mean!? That part seemed very fishy to Youtarou, but in this family, something like an heirloom-class vase seemed like it might just exist.

“Hmm...”

“The vase had been decorated on this room’s alcove until few years ago, but now it is stored in the upper part of the closet in this room, because it would be bad if it broke.”

“You know, the family vase is really huge! It’s so big, I think Niji-chan can be put inside it.” Rikka suddenly jumped into the conversation. “So whenever a baby is born in our home, it’s a tradition to put them at least once inside the vase. On the 100th day after the baby is born, we have that ‘weaning ceremony’ right? Ah, Onii-chan, do you know about it?”

No, well, I’m a little ignorant about such matters...

Still lying down on her side and propping herself up on her elbow, Rikka continued.

“I see. I should guess it’s only natural. Our last baby had her ceremony long ago. A ‘weaning ceremony’ is held on the 100th day after the baby is born. At the time, the baby can only still drink milk, and can’t even eat baby food. “So that the baby won’t have any trouble with food in her entire life”, we make a special meal for the baby and the baby is made to do a little imitation of eating. That is the ‘weaning ceremony’ but...”

Rikka suddenly stopped and spreading her arms tried to indicate the size of the vase.

Just about big enough to be unable to contain within her arms?

“At that ceremony, our family takes out the family vase and we put the baby inside.”

“You put them inside?”

“Yes. Erm, how do I say this? The baby finally becomes a part of our family. It’s that kind of ceremony I guess.” Rikka tilted her head a little. “And well, on that vase, many children are painted. And their number is...”

Listening to the conversation closely, Mizuki suddenly said thoughtfully. “About that, I think I once heard from our grandmother that the vase had only one child on it at first.”

“Eh? But Seika is pretty sure that when she saw vase during Aa-chan’s ceremony, there were many children drawn on it. That’s why she asked Yuuna to help her with counting them...”
Seika suddenly realized. “Now that I think about it, I remember hearing a lot that Mizuki-chan was the only who inherited the talent of our great-grandmother.”

At Seika’s words, Mizuki got a faraway look in her eyes, and began to narrate.

“That vase is a mysterious vase that originally belonged to the grandmother of our grandmother. Whenever a baby is born in our family, the number of children painted on it mysteriously increases. The bigger the family gets, the more the vase rejoices. And when there are enough children that the surface of the vase is filled with them, the greatest happiness will come to the family...”

“Increasing one by one...greatest happiness...? Ahh~!” Rikka suddenly cried out.

“Wh-what!?”

“Rikka-chan, what happened?” Seika was surprised by Rikka’s sudden cry, and the other children also became attentive.

“I remember, whenever Rikka tried to count the number of children on that vase, she became confused and had to count again, but it was definitely 21, 22, or 23...”

“I know right, that’s a few extra!” Yuuna said with a triumphant face.

“Ahh!”

“Ahhhh~!!”

Mari and Seika realized simultaneously. “What if there were 20!” and pointed at Youtarou’s face.

“Ah...” Rikka and Yuuna’s mouths also fell open.

“If you add in Onii-chan, it becomes prefect!”

“Hmm. A little bit to this side, I guess?” Rikka’s thighs touched Youtarou’s cheeks. The thighs that were positioned on both side of his face suddenly closed tightly, sandwiching his head. Half of Rikka’s body was inside the upper part of the closet.

“Ahh, a little more and I’ll get it. Un, it’s got to be in this box, for sure...”

Man, riding on my shoulders while wearing a miniskirt, this girl...Does the fact that I’m a guy even register with her? She’s completely let her guard down. First of all...she’s heavy. Isn’t she a little bit over the age to be giving shoulder rides to?

As soon as he thought that, Rikka’s backside slipped from Youtarou’s shoulder.

Ah, she’s gonna fall.

“Kyaaaaaa~!” Rikka let out a loud scream and fell down. Dust flew everywhere.

“Ahh, I was this close to getting it too~!” Rikka said with a vexed look on her face. She was holding a piece of string of an old looking tea box.

“Uwaah! Did you break something?”

“It’s fine, look, it’s just a piece of string of a tea-bowl box.”

The small wooden box that Rikka presented smiling ear to ear had small unreadable signature on it, and the string that was holding it together had snapped. And then, with a small sound, the side of the old looking box cracked into four pieces from the joint.

“Ah!” Rikka opened her mouth and her movements ceased, as she began to panic.

“Awawawawa~. It’s alright, it’s alright. We didn’t see this!” She somehow gathered and arranged all the wooden pieces together in their original shape, and tried to cram it back into the closet.

“Uwaan~ I can’t reach it! Onii-chan, one more shoulder ride, please!” Rikka said, shaking her hips.

“Okay.” *This is bad, my shoulders could get used to this sensation...*

In the end, it was decided by the ‘Weighting-by-being-carried-by-Onii-chan championship’ that Mizuki, who was far lighter than Rikka, and in addition had a knack for finding things, would climb up to the closet compartment. Mizuki had the size to just about fit inside it. On top of

everything else, she also had her mysterious Shrine-maiden powers, which made her sensitive to strange presences.

“Un. Is it really in here? I don’t really feel grandma’s presence in here...” After Youtarou pushed Mizuki into the closet’s upper compartment, she started searching around inside it, helped by the light of the flashlight Youtarou was holding, dragging behind the long tails of the Hakama¹⁸ she was wearing. Among the old boxes of various sizes, the air was stale with the smell of insecticide. The light from the flashlight produced eerie shadows. But Mizuki was almost swimming in it gleefully. It didn’t really fit her image, considering her age.

“Mizuki, aren’t you scared?” When Youtarou tried asking that, Mizuki replied:

“What’s there to be scared about? There is nothing here but old things. They can’t do me any harm, and I like old things anyways. And the things inside the boxes have aged well. There might some things with cute Tsukomogami ¹⁹attached to them. If I find one, won’t it be interesting?”

“H-Hmm.” *Is that how it is?* Once again, Youtarou was reminded about the strange powers of the girls in this household.

The one who is said to be able to see the spirits and the auras of people, Mizuki. Fubuki, who is weak to heat and has bad eyesight, and yet has the brains of a genius. Mari, who is said to be the reincarnation of Marie Antoinette, and Yuuna, who adamantly claims that she is the descendant of a great line of mages— Hm? Those last two seem a little different.

“Mumu~!” He heard Mizuki voice. “I found it! I can feel grandma’s presence from it.”

Hearing her voice, Youtarou looked through the entrance of the compartment. It’s width was about 50 centimeters. It was an old discolored wooden box that was sitting in a corner of the compartment.

“If you are my blood brother, maybe you can see them? The small, pea-sized imps dancing around the box?”

Imps? Wait, you mean...spirits?! Panicking, he rubbed his eyes. Oh, thank goodness, I can’t see anything like that.

¹⁸ A Hakama is the lower part, or the “skirt” of the traditional Japanese dress, Kimono.

¹⁹ The term Tsukomogami is generally understood to be applied to virtually any object that has reached their 100th birthday and thus become alive and self-aware.

“By the way, where is this ‘grandma’ person you keep talking about?”

“Oh, right now, she is over there.”

Over where!? Wait, I’m too scared to ask anything more than that.

“Okay then, Anija, pull this with me will you?”

“Okay.” Following the order of the 4 year old Mizuki felt somehow good.

Wait...Does this mean that I lean towards M!?

“What happened? Did you find anything?” Rikka called out from behind after noticing the two talking. Youtarou called out to the sisters who were playing around the room while waiting for them to find the vase.

“We found it. But it seems to be pretty far inside, so I’m going to pull it together with Mizuki...”

“Roger!”

“Roger that!”

“...and help her get it down...”

Everyone answered in unison before Youtarou had a chance to finish his sentence, and began lining up behind him in order to pull out the box.

The vase that came out of the box was exactly as Rikka had described.

“See? Exactly like I told you. ☆”

“Yeah, amazing. It is similar to a fault.”

Rikka and Seika nodded in unison. Youtarou looked at the vase closely. He wasn’t very keen on collecting old things. He didn’t even watch the ‘Appraise Anything!’ show on TV. But even he felt that this particular vase was really expensive.

In this house in which everything was over the top, the vase was put away in an even more over the top old looking box. It was big enough that you couldn’t even think of using it for everyday things, and had a delicate design. There were even some gold leaves attached here and there.

“So, what are we going to do now?” Yuuna asked with a smile.

“Eh? What are we going...to do?” Rikka replied with some surprise, blinking her wide eyes.

“What are we...What were we going to do again?”

“Rikka-chan~” Seika drooped her shoulders.

“We’re gonna count the number of children on it!” Mari said, thrusting her index finger at the vase vigorously.

Everybody began counting all at once.

“One...Two...Three...”

“Ichi...Ni...San...”

“Eight...Nine...Ten...” You could call it lively, but there was a more appropriate word: chaos.

“20! Amazing! It really is 20!”

“Huh? Isn’t it 21?”

“That can’t be! Yuuna counted up to 27...”

“Hey wait! Don’t start spinning it on your own!”

“But Mari started counting it from here!”

“I felt like there was another one in the shade of this tree drawn here...”

It was a total mess.

“Like I said, don’t spin it around!”

“Ahh, I lost count in the middle again!”

“Hey! Don’t pull on it!”

Before they knew it, it became a struggle over the vase.

And then—.

Someone pulled on it strongly, and the vase fell on its side...

“Ahh! This is bad—!”

...and started rolling. The big vase gained speed surprisingly quickly. In front of it was the sliding door that lead to the veranda, and a pillar!

“This is bad!” Rikka and Yuuna quickly jumped out of the vase’s way.

It was now just question of whether Rikka’s outstretched hand would reach it first, or the pillar. The vase...

Gashan! The vase cracked and split apart with a loud noise. It was like a balloon bursting, reduced to small pieces. An unimaginable silence descended on the sisters that had been earlier the very definition of noisy.

“.....”

“U...U...Uwaan!” Rikka’s face distorted as she began to cry.

“Uwaan!” Yuuna followed suit. And then Mari, Mizuki, and even Nijiko, affected by the atmosphere, began to cry.



“What should I do about this?” Youtarou exhaled while holding the broken pieces in his hand.

After a bout of crying, the mood in the room was a gloomy one, like a funeral. Youtarou looked around at everyone’s faces.

“Haruka Onee-chan is gonna kill us if she finds out.” Rikka said, trembling uncontrollably.

“Tsurara Onee-chan also really liked the child that looked like Yuki-chan in the painting.” Yuuna sniffed.

“This was a really expensive vase. I heard that if we sell it, we could earn a considerable amount of money.” Mari said, bowing her head.

“Ahh! So many cute Tsukomogami that were just playing around innocently have disappeared like mist...” Mizuki said in a trembling voice.

“Uwa! Uwaah!” Nijiko just kept on crying. Youtarou, unable to do anything else for her, just silently kept patting her head gently.

“What do we do? Should we just...pack it all up and pretend nothing happened? We might be able to get away with it, you know?” Rikka whispered a devil’s whisper.

“Th-That”s...” Seika began in a trembling voice.

“Even if we do that, Urara Onee-chan or Haruka Onee-chan will definitely find out.” Yuuna said in a downhearted tone.

“No, Hotaru Onee-chama is the one who is surprisingly the most perceptive about these things...” Mari said, her eyes flashing.

“In that case, when it comes to blunders like this, the powers Mizore Aneja or Miharuru Aneja possess to see through them are unrivaled.”

“Hmm...yes, you’re right.” Rikka’s shoulders drooped again. “Ah~ahhn. All Rikka had wanted to do was to count the number of children to make sure that Onii-chan was part of our family...But instead, I got even Onii-chan caught up in this mess.” She said, dejected. “It was a really, really important vase for the family. Now we can never use it again.”

The room became deathly silent.

“Grandma used to say: Having a lot of family is a very good thing, because nobody is born all alone from the bark of a tree. Just like the painting on this vase, live everyday loving your

family. Just like the painting on this vase, live everyday happily. Then, even without the miracle of this vase, happiness will surely come to you..." Mizuki murmured.

Everybody's face filled with distress.

"Such a beautiful..."

"Such an important..."

"Our beautiful family vase..." Tears began to overflow from Rikka's eyes again. "It broke! Uwaan~! Great-Grandma, I'm so sorry!!"

Youtarou's chest was hurting.

These small, noisy sisters.

So yeah, they were a little weird. No well, maybe more than a little, and it was sometimes quite troubling. And he still felt that the number of family members was too much.

But...

Why were these girls so likeable? Even if they were convinced that he was their older brother, they were still so kind to him, a shady person they had met only recently. Youtarou was deeply moved.

So there are families like this too...

"You can say that I was the one who broke it." Youtarou suddenly spoke up.

"Eh?"

Yep. This is probably for the best. This was the extent of what Youtarou could do. If it was just getting yelled at, he would swap anytime for the sake of these kind little sisters of his.

"But in return, you have to absolutely keep this a secret, okay?"

Everyone was staring at Youtarou with wide, round eyes. Nijiko, too tired to cry anymore, quietly appealed Youtarou for a hug.

“Quiet down!!! What are you guys all worked up about!? It’s almost evening, so—”

As if things weren’t bad enough, the one who opened the sliding door of the hall was the sixth daughter, Tsurara. Among the sisters, she had the most uptight and strict personality, and was often feared by her younger sisters. Sure enough, Yuuna immediately started trembling.

“You made such a mess again...” Tsurara looked around the room, with an air of resignation.

In the hall which was usually empty, the six sisters Rikka, Seika, Yuuna, Mari, Mizuki and Nijiko, and the so called “eldest son” that had arrived recently –in Tsurara’s mind he was just servant– were sitting in a circle. The sliding doors of the closet in north part of the hall and its upper compartment were open, and its contents were spread here and there all around the room. The marbles Nijiko was playing with, the beanbags that belonged to Mizuki, the Karuta cards that still hadn’t been gathered up, in addition to the pieces of something were all spread around the seven of them. Tsurara almost got dizzy from all the clutter.

“It’s almost time for dinner. You guys are playing with the things in the closet again? Aren’t you guys always being told to not to open the closet in the hall because there are important things in there? And you guys got over-excited and broke something again, didn’t you? Even though you have been taught not to handle things roughly... Now, let’s hurry up and clean this place. Afterwards, Mari, Mizuki, Nijiko, you guys hurry up and get in the bath. Rikka, Seika, Yuuna, you guys need to hurry up with your homework or else the time...” While speaking bluntly like that, she suddenly stopped and her eyes went wide. “W-Wait, what’s this?” She had thought it was a toy or something so she hadn’t paid much attention to it, but now that she looked closely at the pieces...

Wait, don’t tell me this is... Her gaze fell to the open amber box. “Don’t tell me, it this...the family vase?” Tsurara face went from red to blue with agitation, and she became unable to say anything.

“Sorry, I said that I wanted to see it and had it taken out. And then my hand slipped and...” Tsurara became still as if her body was paralyzed.

“I-I can’t believe it...for something like this to happen...” She wasn’t even paying any attention to Youtarou. She just stood there, muttering in a small voice at this horrible sight. The other sisters became unable to say anything. Even if they had been living together for all these years, they rarely saw Tsurara get this angry.

“Wh-What the hell were you thinking!? Are you saying that *knowing* how precious this is? I can’t believe this!” She looked up at the heavens. “This is a vase that tells the history of our family. It is a vase that has been passed to us from great-grandmother and to her from her grandmother, unbroken. It is a vase that has a great history. It is supposed to bring our family great prosperity and happiness.” Tsurara walked up to Youtarou saying that, and without breaking eye contact suddenly pulled back her hand. The sound of a slap echoed around the big room as Tsurara slapped him. “Don’t just easily say “My hand slipped” while lowering that stupid face!”

Ouch! Pain ran across Youtarou’s cheeks. Tsurara’s hand that was still in the air was trembling. The surrounding sisters all gasped.

“If you don’t know then I will tell you. Listen well. When anyone in this house is born, they are put into this vase to pray for their future good health and happiness. Asahi, Sora, Nijiko, all of them. Of course, that includes me too. We even have pictures of it. That’s what it means to be a family. We share all kinds of memories as we grow up. We can never get back the past afterwards, so we carve the priceless history of our family into our memories. One year after we are born, a signature with red ink and our picture of us being inserted into the vase is put into an album.” She pointed to the pieces of the vase that were scattered over the tatami. “Asahi went to sleep like a log when she was put in there, making everyone laugh. We still tease Watayuki that she has a weak body because she was afraid at the time when she was put in and came out immediately. That’s a joke of course, but to us, they are important memories that become the proof of our bond as a family! But of course you don’t know that. Yes, by entering into the vase, we are recognized as a member of the family by the vase, and that proof is engraved onto the vase...No wait, telling something like this sincerely to someone like you who has only appeared in front of us recently won’t change anything. You, who we don’t even know if he was really born in our family and received the blessing of the vase, you suspicious ‘brother’!!”

Tsurara’s voice grew gradually more and more intense, and her eyes slanted upwards.

“Listen here. I don’t know with what intentions you came to this house –Well, you’re probably aiming to get a share in the inheritance, or some stupid curiosity probably brought you here.” The air in the room grew as cold as ice. “Well, I don’t really care what you are thinking inside that worthless head of yours. Just don’t forget this. I don’t care what the others think. I...” Tsurara made a gesture with her finger as if she was thinking “impossible”.

“No matter what Mama says, no matter what Miharuru Ane-sama says...” She said while raising her voice gradually, like a screw being unscrewed.

“My heart knows. It’s screaming...” Youtarou gently pressed on his cheek where he had been slapped.

“That you are our brother...” She gazed at him with a gaze like she was challenging him seriously. His cheek was hot and painful.

“I don’t believe that in the slightest!!”

Tsurara’s eyes didn’t allow any rebuttal. She took a step forward, aligned herself next to Youtarou, and brought her mouth near his ear.

“It’s impossible for an eldest son to exist. For starters, the fact that you are the same age as Hikaru Ane-sama is the strange, no matter how you think about it. You must have been thinking that all these sisters are pretty laid back, softhearted, stupid and easy to deceive. But I am different from my elder sisters. I won’t be deceived by likes of you. Do you understand? If you have something like a conscience, you might want to get out of this house, fast. However, if you really intend to stay like this in this house, you would do well to remember that there is someone who doesn’t believe in you, right here!” She said, lowering her voice so that no one could hear. It seemed like waves of anger were crashing against Youtarou’s ears.

A moment later, they heard the hurried footsteps of someone wearing room shoes approaching.

“Everyone, where are you? I heard the loud voice of Tsurara-chan all the way here.” Haruka opened the sliding door casually. As the sight of the room came into her view, she let out a scream while covering her mouth. “Ahh!” Hotaru was just behind her. “Is that the family vase?” Haruka asked in a voice that was like a scream.

“The vase great-grandmother treasured...” Hotaru also came close to crying, but somehow held back. “Everyone, playing around like that is dangerous. I’ll clean it up now.”

They both dashed back to the living room to get tools to clean up the pieces. As if that was some kind of signal, Tsurara began picking up the pieces of the vase. As Youtarou moved to help her, “Don’t you dare touch them! I don’t want help from the guy who trampled over the history of our family. The guy who doesn’t even know the worth of family should hurry up and get out of here!!” Her voice wavered. Nijiko started crying again, so Seika and Yuuna took Nijiko and Mizuki to the living room.

“Onii-chan...” Rikka said with face that looked like she was about to start crying.

It's alright. But if you don't want the commotion to get any bigger than this, don't give in and confess halfway, alright? Youtarou somehow signaled with his eyes. Rikka had a troubled expression on her face, but under the circumstances, she just nodded reluctantly, and saying "I'll bring something to cool that down." dashed off in the direction of the kitchen. Hearing that, Youtarou remembered that he had been slapped, and gently touched his cheek again. It was still slightly warm. But it didn't feel like it was too bad. His skin might be a little red, if at all.

Yep, girls really do have less physical power... He thought. In reality, because hadn't been the one to break the vase, it wouldn't be weird to say that he didn't mind it too much. But, the things Tsurara had said, especially the things she had whispered in his ear, really stabbed at his heart. And on top of it was the fact that they were very true words...

After that, Tsurara somehow dispelled her anger by continuously ignoring Youtarou. Hotaru and Haruka looked like they were in shock, but nonetheless cleaned up the pieces of the vase. They did not blame Youtarou even once, who was continuously apologizing.

The incident seemed more or less settled, at least temporarily. Probably because it was such a big family, even though there were some effects of the incident still lingering about, the conversation at the dinner table didn't really stop. Dinner that day began somewhat peacefully.

"Really, I can't believe it! Even though he's just a servant, he dare lay hand on our family vase." Tsurara said, piercing a piece of fried chicken with her chopsticks. She was still a little irritated.

"What's broken is broken. We can't help it. It's a pity that the family vase broke...But it's not like everyone did it on purpose."

Haruka said, passing Tsurara the grated radish with citrus sauce.

Today's menu was: Fired chicken, accompanied by grated radish with citrus sauce. Tomato Salad. Asparagus, bacon and egg cocotte. Parmesan and Aioli.

In Seafood, they had: Lemon marinade of onion. Kenchinjiru²⁰. Fired noodles.

...Wait, fired noodles? Why does this menu have fired noodles?

"Oh, Haruka Ane-sama, saying something so soft again. That's unfortunate. And it wasn't everyone who broke the family vase, it was the servant that has recently arrived at our house. He confessed himself, so there is no doubt about it. Really now. Such a clumsy servant is useless. If he knows even a little bit of shame, he should hurry up and get out of this house."

As Tsurara flourished and gestured with her hands to make a point, the piece of fried chicken that was still pierced on her chopsticks flew off.

"Kyaaa!"

The piece of chicken flew into the Kenchinjiru bowl of the 9th daughter Urara, sitting next to Tsurara, quietly eating her food.

"Ah, sorry about that."

²⁰ Kenchinjiru is a clear soup made with root vegetables and tofu.

“Tsurara-chan, that’s why I’m always telling you its bad manners to pierce food with your chopsticks...” Both Tsurara and Haruka spoke at once.

“That’s because this fried chicken is slippery. Ever since the New Year started, we changed our chopsticks to lacquered chopsticks didn’t we? It’s probably because of that. I wasn’t that good at using chopsticks from the start.” Saying that, Tsurara tried to recover her piece of chicken from Urara’s bowl. The piece of chicken that had become immersed in the soup inside Urara’s bowl, slipped and slid from the clumsy Tsurara’s grasp, floating on top of the brown oil.

“This stupid, piece of...chicken! So irritating! Perish this instant! Eeii!” As Tsurara became desperate and began thrusting blindly at the piece of chicken, suddenly Urara stood up with a loud noise.

“Ah, sorry. Did I make you mad?” Tsurara glanced at Urara. Her eyes were closed, and her eyebrows were knit together. Massaging her temples desperately, she muttered: “I can’t stand this anymore.”

This is bad! Tsurara thought, holding a hand over her mouth. *Urara is about to erupt.*

Everyone there, except Miharuru who had still yet to come home, and Asahi, who had finished her dinner and was now playing in the playpen, took emergency evacuation measures.

“Hey! You there!” With a flourish, Urara pointed the ends of her noodle-carrying chopsticks at Youtarou. There was only fried noodles and kenchinjiru in front of Urara. In fact, the fried noodles had been included in the menu to correspond to the picky tastes of Urara. She was not very good with sour flavors. “Why are you still here with that carefree attitude of yours!?”

Eh? Me? The one who sent the chicken flying was Tsurara...

For a moment he was surprised, but then he immediately realized that Urara wasn’t talking about that. “After having broken after precious vase...” Urara’s hands began trembling. The dining table returned to silence. “I can’t believe you are sitting here eating dinner, feigning ignorance. You can do that because you don’t really know the meaning of that vase. That vase was the precious belonging of great-grandmother. If it was one of us that broke it, the food wouldn’t pass from our throats because of the guilt. Not only that, we wouldn’t be able to stay at the house because of the shame. And yet, here you are, making that shameless face and eating chicken...”

Youtarou hurriedly gulped down the piece of chicken in his mouth without chewing it properly. “Sorry...” That was the only thing he could say.

“Urara-chan, that case is already closed. It’s not like Onii-chan is the only one at fault. He didn’t even know the existence of the vase.” Making a troubled expression, Hotaru came from the direction of the kitchen holding a pot of tea. It was like she released a spell.

But Urara changed her angle of attack and continued. “That’s right! Rikka and the rest are also to blame. Showing the family vase to a guy like this. Men really are all so insensitive. He’s clumsy, and on top of it insensitive. Shamelessly eating chicken—” Hearing this was too much for Rikka and she got angry.

“Urara-chan, that’s too much! Onii-chan is a part of our family now! What’s wrong with showing him the family vase?”

“Rikka-chan!”

Rikka was unusually angry, and her face was red. “It’s just that he was not able to live in this house. Onii-chan is a part of our family now, same as you. Of course, the fact that me and rest of us took out the family vase out on our own was wrong, but wanting Onii-chan to know more about as fast as possible is the most natural thing. We started the family diary for that purpose too. I know that Urara-chan has an irrational hate for all men, and that in itself is fine. But! That and this has no relation. And in the first place, Onii-chan is not at fault at all. Actually, it—it was...”

This is bad! I can’t let Rikka say any more than that. As soon as Youtarou stood up, Mizore, who had been until then calmly eating her food with a seeming no-involvement stance, interjected softly without raising her eyes: “It’s not like I don’t understand Rikka’s feelings. But that doesn’t change the fact that you carelessly taking out the family vase without permission ultimately led to it being broken, does it?”

Ahh, even Mizore. I wonder what she is thinking.

Rikka began trembling all over. “Even Mizore Onee-chan is saying such heartless things...”

“Though I don’t know who really broke it...” Mizore said, shooting Rikka a quick glance. Hearing that, Rikka became unable to say anything.

“Some things can be recovered from, and others are not so. I don’t really care about the family vase...”

“That’s not true...”

“Even though it’s a magical vase...” It was uncertain that the things that Seika and Yuuna said under their breath reached the ears of Mizore or not.

"I don't care if it's the vase or a person. In front of this infinite Universe, they are all the same dust. But I don't think that this kind of rule breaking can just be forgiven easily. Because, unlike me, it was very precious to Tsurara and Urara." Mizore's statement, as the statement of the one eldest among those present in the absence of Miharuru, invited an even heavier atmosphere.

"Everyone, I think it's not good to quarrel at the dining table."

"Ye-Yeah, these things are bad for your digestion..." The vain efforts of Haruka and Hotaru to calm everyone disappeared into nothingness. A sound of a sniffle came from the direction where Mari was sitting.

Ahh...This tension. This...strained atmosphere. Youtarou wanted to run away. It's my fault that these peaceful sister who are on very good terms are now fighting. Should I have not taken the blame at that time? No, at the time, that seemed like the best opinion. And anyhow, it is a little too late to be thinking that.

"I am really sorry. It was such a precious vase for all of you, and it broke because of me mishandling it. I'll take responsibility for this." Youtarou felt like if this went on for any longer, Rikka and the others would end up confessing and telling the truth, so he suddenly spoke up with a loud voice.

I just have to end this conversation somehow. Mari and Mizuki look like they are at the end of their ropes.

"Take responsibility? How? No matter what it is, just like a local railway that has been abandoned, once a thing is gone, it never comes back." Urara said, turning her eyes towards Youtarou. Hearing that, Youtarou was at a loss for words.

"...."

Looking at the voiceless Youtarou, Urara couldn't stop her words.

"You don't have the right to be our family!" She shouted. Urara herself couldn't tell why she was so frustrated anymore. "You don't understand anything about our family, and you don't have any right to be a member of our family. If you say that you will take responsibility, then get out of here at once! We don't need a male in our house. Yes. Men, who are filthy, irresponsible and insensitive, I hate them with a passion!"

At that moment, Hikaru, who had been keeping her silence until then suddenly left her seat loudly.

“Thanks for the meal!” She said, with a hint of finality in her tone. And then, as if that was their signal, Haruka and Hotaru seemingly came alive.

“Ahh! Look at the time!”

“Okay then, everyone say “Thanks for the food”. The talking will have to wait till tomorrow, okay? The small ones will help me carry the dishes...”

“Okkayyy!” The frozen air thawed at once, even though Urara’s words still hung in the air. Youtarou thought he saw Kosame, who was sitting next to Urara, hugging Urara’s shoulders from the corner of his eye, before his arm was taken by Hikaru, and he was pulled into the corridor unconditionally.

"You really are an idiot, did you know that?" Pulling Youtarou along by the arm, Hikaru walked down the corridor briskly.

"But if I didn't say something like that, everyone wouldn't..." Youtarou somehow kept up with brisk pace, even though his balance was unsteady as his back was bent forward. They walked as far as Youtarou's room, formerly Hikaru's room, and when they reached the door of the room, Hikaru suddenly stopped. Youtarou almost fell down. He was a little bit out of breath.

"Don't come out of room for today. Idiot. I'm sure you're just covering for someone anyways." She looked at Youtarou with sharp eyes.

Gulp. "Th-That's not true..."

"Don't lie to me too, idiot." She suddenly pinched Youtarou's cheek lightly.

Ouch. He felt the soft touch of Hikaru's hand and a slight pain.

"You might've deceived Tsurara and Urara, but Mizore Ane and I aren't falling for that so easily." Hikaru was very irritated for some reason. "You kind-hearted idiot! You really are an idiot. It's because you defended your little sisters by telling lies in that manner that things have gotten so bad. Tsurara and Urara becoming angry is nothing out of the ordinary, but at end even Mizore Ane began pouting and saying such obviously mean things...I swear, all of this and that was all because of your idiocy, you idiot!"

"You don't have to call me an idiot..." *so many times, do you?* The line in his heart came to his lips unconsciously. Hikaru looked at him with a blank face.

"Do you...dislike being called an idiot?"

"Well of course, it goes without saying that anyone would..." Seeing Youtarou's discouraged face, Hikaru burst into laughter.

"Now this is a surprise. So you feel like that too."

"That's obvious— mmpf!" *I feel as if I am not being taken seriously, so that's completely natural!* Is what Youtarou was going to shout, but Hikaru covered his mouth with her hand.

"Shhh! Quiet down. If someone comes it will become a complicated situation again, won't it?" She glanced up and down the corridor. "Sorry, I'll try not to call you idiot so much from now on. But it has become something of habit, so if I do say it, I'm very sorry. But yeah, try to mind it too much." Hikaru's face had returned to its normal handsome state.

“Me too, I’m sorry.”

“Hm?”

“I’m really sorry.”

“For breaking the vase? It’s not like you broke it so...”

Ahh, so she really does know the truth. Youtarou though. “No, not about that. Because of me, everyone started quarrelling.”

Hmm. So that’s troubling you too. As if she was thinking that, Hikaru’s eyes become a little kinder.

“At times like those, you should just hurry up and leave the room. Then everyone will calm down on their own.”

“But, I felt like that would be too irresponsible...”

“You were called irresponsible, insensitive and a fool by Urara anyways, so isn’t it the same?”

“No, no, not a fool, I think I was called filthy, or something...”

“I see. Yeah, being called filthy is still better than being called a fool. Because a fool is an individual insult, but filthy is a word that is directed at all men, as per Urara. You’re a man so you can’t help but fall in that category...”

Pfft~! Neither of them could stop it, and both of them burst into laughter while looking at each other.

“Sorry, you had to see her in such an unsightly state. She’s usually not like that.”

“Well, it was my fault to begin with.”

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Even if you say that—”

“Like I said, it’s not like that.”

“But if I wasn’t there, it wouldn’t have—”

“And I’m telling you that that’s not true.”

“No, but—”

“Quiet! Don’t say that anymore, you idiot.” Hikaru’s hand came flying towards Youtarou’s cheek. This time a soft, small sound came from his cheek.

“I said it again, didn’t I?” Hikaru smiled. “It seems like when I am looking at your face the word “idiot” just slips out on its own.” *You kind-hearted idiot*. That’s what Hikaru’s face seemed to be saying. “Anyways, don’t worry about it. Our family is rather simple. By tomorrow they’ll have forgotten all about this. If they say something to you tomorrow morning, just don’t reply. Time heals. Grandma often used to say: You can naught but forget painful things! You got it?”

Saying that, Hikaru softly hugged Youtarou. Her sweet smell enveloped Youtarou like a dream.

“Hey, where’s your reply? Say okay already.”

“Okay.” As the sound of her voice resonated inside his body, Youtarou felt a ticklish sensation.

Even though she said all that, that night, Youtarou lay awake in his bed, unable to sleep. Moonlight flowed through the windows curtains, making the room bright. Gazing at the ceiling, Youtarou was thinking again.

Even is she says that...Today's events were unmistakably my fault.

He remembered what Tsurara had said to him in the hall.

And then, at the dining table. The face of Urara as her lips trembled with anger.

The red face of Rikka that looked like she was about to cry.

The guilt-filled, downcast head of Mari, who was always energetic.

The frustrated-looking face of Mizuki looking as if she wanted to say something but couldn't.

The small, scared, innocent face of Nijiko.

The faces of Hotaru and Haruka, who cooked such delicious food, and yet didn't get angry when dinner time was completely ruined. Instead, they worried for everyone.

The faces of Yuuna and Seika, whose expression told him that they stood by him, and the rest of the small sisters.

Because of him, the dinner time that supposed to be a fun experience, became a really bad experience for all of them.

And then there was Hikaru. She had led him all the way back to his room. Her last smile came back to him. The sinking feeling in Youtarou's chest subsided a little after seeing her smile.

Really now.

Our family is rather simple. She had said and just smiled silently. Wasn't it possible that the simplest one was Hikaru? She had said they would forget by tomorrow, but it was possible that she was the only one who would forget.

Is she going to be fine, being an "Onee-chan" with that kind of attitude? Youtarou asked himself. *Should I not be at this house after all?*

A home that was most peaceful when he wasn't there. Those very uncommon but friendly 19 sisters.

But because a foreign existence like me came here, the balance of this house has been destroyed. The painful words of Tsurara came back to him. *I'm sure that I can't really become a part of their family. I was supposed to have known that very well myself, but choose to feign ignorance until someone told me.* Youtarou realized. *I'm sure it was because I was very happy...*

“Onii-chan is also a part of this family!” The words Rikka had shouted with a red face caused his chest to hurt.

I’m sorry, Rikka. I’m not a really a part of your family. In reality, I’m just a poor, lonely middle school student. I’m like a stray dog that your kind “Hikaru Onee-chan” picked up. Even if the family vase had some kind of mysterious power, I’m sure that I wouldn’t appear on it. So you shouldn’t really include me in something so important as your family. This past one month, even as I was surrounded by the kindness of everyone, I always felt guilty somewhere in my heart. I am only here by deceiving everyone else.

He wondered how many times he came close to confessing everything when his silence became too painful. Of course, the ones who made the plan were that intense mother and Miharuru.

The more the little sisters showed him their gentle, cute, innocent selves, and the more they idolized him and called him “Onii-chan!” the more Youtarou felt like he couldn’t take it anymore.

I’m not really your brother. Tsurara. Urara. You two are right. Youtarou thought to himself. *There is no need for a man in this house. I don’t have the right to be a part of this family. It’d be better if I left.* “That would best for everyone...” he tried whispering to himself. He became a little bit more convinced.

The face of Hikaru when she got angry at the dining table and stood up. That kind smile he had seen as her last expression in the corridor.

“I’m sorry, Hikaru.” The first time he called her by her name. Though she wasn’t present.

Following some strange occurrences, he had found himself with ‘sibling’ of his own age. He had never known what to call her. He just tried to make do with “hey” or “um”.

“I’m sorry. Many happy things happened, and also many things that I am really grateful for...but...”

All alone in his dark room, he smiled. A smile that would be never seen by anyone. *Yes. I will leave this house. That is the best way to preserve Hikaru’s smile.*

“Thanks for everything. I’m really sorry that I did nothing but cause you trouble.”

I won’t cause any more trouble for you...

At that time, Hikaru was sleeping soundly. It was a very peaceful sleep. She had no grievances. That was because Youtarou had promised to not worry about the recent events anymore. That's why, there was nothing left for Hikaru to think about.

Thank Goodness, now everything will be fine. We can convince Urara by telling her a train joke. When the times comes, she'll just have to teach Youtarou how to appease Urara. They'll just have to go see the railway crossing, or ride together in her favorite commuter train. As for Tsurara...well. We'll leave her alone for now. Her getting angry is nothing unusual. Fufufu~.

That night, Hikaru dreamt of doing the "Thousand-knock²¹" exercise of baseball she used love in Middle-school with Youtarou.

²¹ A practice of pitching balls until you are too exhausted to stand.

The next day was a holiday. It was breakfast time in the dining room.

The morning menu was relatively simple: Milk tea and Belgian waffles. Fruit salad of strawberries, bananas, kiwi and oranges, topped off with papaya's yogurt sauce.

"Is Onii-chan sleeping in late, I wonder?" Hotaru said, with a little concern in her voice.

"Ufufu~. Maybe Haruka should go wake him up?" Haruka, saying this and immediately leaving her seat was stopped by Hikaru.

"It's fine, since it's a holiday after all. He probably just wants to sleep well."

"Ara, that's a shame. And here Haruka was thinking that she would go wake up Ouji-sama like a gentle, refreshing spring breeze...²²" As Haruka made this light joke, Urara made a retort in a small voice:

"There's no way a breeze wind will blow in February, is there? I mean really, ever since that person arrived, Haruka Ane-sama has had a breeze wind constantly blowing through her mind..."

"Ara? Urara-chan, did you say something?" Haruka said, squinting her eyes while smiling.

"Uh-un. Nothing..." Panicking, Urara focused on getting a piece of banana out of the fruit salad while carefully avoiding the yoghurt, and put it in her mouth.

Really? Yoghurt over fruit salad...what is this, harassment!? Urara hated sour things, and of course Hotaru and Haruka both knew this fact. "Nothing...at all."

"You shouldn't be too picky with what you eat, you know. Sour things are good for your health, and of course, for your skin too." Hearing Haruka talk in such a cheerful voice, thinking *I don't really care about my skin* Urara put the next bite into her mouth absentmindedly. *Sour~!* The piece of kiwi that had accidentally came in was causing her pain inside of her mouth.

"Men are really sloppy after all." She whispered in a small voice that no one could hear. *Even if it's a holiday, oversleeping in the worst...*

"Ah, Urara-chan! The sauce is dripping down!" The eighth daughter Kosame sitting next to her quickly took out a napkin.

²² Haruka's name, written Harukaze, literally means a spring-breeze.

“Ahh, this is bad— sorry...” Helping the panicking Urara wipe the sauce off of her skirt, Kosame knew for a fact that the Princess of Irrational Anger Urara actually hadn’t got much sleep last night.

Rikka, Kosame and Urara shared a room.

After the events of last night, maybe because she was worn out from the fighting, Rikka went to sleep unusually soon after they returned to their room.

“Urara-chan, if you say the same kinds of things tomorrow, then we’ll have a fight on our hands. If that happens, then I won’t help with your homework either. Hmph!” Before getting into bed last night, Rikka said that and, like a kid, stuck her tongue out at Urara.

Urara, in turn, said: “I don’t remember you ever helping me with my homework, and talking about that worthless man is filthy in and of itself, so whatever.” and got all worked up.

Hearing this, Rikka made a helpless pose and said: “Urara’s men hating has begun again.” She continued provoking Urara: “Saying “I hate him” all the time is more suspicious. Ah. I figured it out. Urara-chan, in reality, you actually like Onii-chan don’t you? Ahh, Rikka has it all figured out. It’s that, where the more you like someone, the more you want to tease them...Ah, surely, this is...”

Ah, Rikka-chan, that will have the opposite effect. But before Kosame could stop her...

“Rikka-chan!”

...Urara’s face became red and looked like it was filling up like a balloon.

“Ahh, Urara-chan, if that was the case then you should have said something sooner. I’m sure you were jealous of us playing with Onii-chan all the time, weren’t you?” Rikka shook her head exaggeratedly like she was a foreigner saying “Oh no!”

“It wasn’t like we were trying to exclude you or anything. If Urara-chan wanted to join us, then she should just have said so. Really, Urara-chan is like small child, somehow courageous, and really easy to tease!” Holding Urara’s head, she began furiously patting it.

“Hey- Wa-Wait!” Trying her best to get away, the color of Urara’s face became more and more red. But, seeing the face she was making as she struggled— *huh?* Kosame realized something.

Maybe, Urara-chan is feeling a little regretful?

That night. After enjoying the one sided pretend-pro-wrestling, Rikka had fallen asleep like a log. Kosame realized that Urara, couldn’t fall asleep and was just tossing and turning. Kosame

had always been a light sleeper, and even a small presence or slight movement was enough to wake her up.

“Having trouble sleeping, Urara-chan?” In the room that was completely dark because Urara hated the orange light of the night, Kosame tried asking in a small voice.

“Sorry, was I being noisy?”

So she really was awake. “Uh-un. I just woke up by chance. Do you want to go to the toilet?” The bedside clock showed 1:00.

“Should I go with you?” Urara asked.

“Eh? Ah...Yes.” It wasn’t like Kosame wanted to go to the toilet, but she thought it would be a little bit of change of scenery for Urara, so she agreed.

The already fully awake Urara helped the still hazy Kosame get up. In these kinds of situations, Urara was the surprisingly attentive type. She gently covered up Kosame’s shoulders with the gown that she had set down a chair.

Urara-chan really is kind. If only she would who the same kindness to Onii-chan too... Kosame couldn’t help but think that way. The two softly left the room.

After going to the toilet, the two were on the way back, when Urara suddenly asked as if she was confirming: “Kosame-chan, you are also vexed that the family vase was broken, aren’t you?”

“Uh...” For a moment, Kosame hesitated to answer. The family vase the great-grandmother treasured. It was a family heirloom that was supposed to have mysterious powers, and was a symbol of the unity and history of the family. But more than anything else, it was sign of their happiness, with a lot of memories attached to it.

“Yes, I was very vexed when I heard it broke, but...”

“But...?” As is she had been expecting that word, Urara asked while looking down without moving.

“But, just because the vase broke, for us to start arguing amongst ourselves makes me even sadder. Just like Haruka Onee-chan said, the vase will not return to its former shape, and it’s not like Onii-chan and the rest did it on purpose...”

“But it’s something so horrible that it can’t be reversed.”

“Yes, I understand that. Kosame does feel very apologetic towards great-grandma, since her precious vase has broken...”

Urara was startled. She hadn’t even thought of that. *How dare you break something so precious to great-grandma!* Shouting and complaining, she only felt the anger that something of hers had been broken.

“...but in the end, Kosame will choose everyone staying friends over the vase. Ehehe. But, I’m sure that’s because I am a cowardly person, and am not very brave like Urara-chan and Rikka-chan. That’s why I can’t say aloud what I am really thinking. I am really bad at fights and at getting angry, so...”

“Kosame-chan is really great, isn’t she?” Urara said.

“No I am not! Kosame thinks that Urara-chan, who’s always smart and says what she wants clearly, and leads everyone else, and proposes so many things, even though she’s one who’s supposed to be one year junior, is just plain amazing. Kosame wants to become like Urara-chan.” Kosame said panicking, as her glasses fogged up because of the difference between the corridor in winter and the room they had come from. Her look was very funny.

“I want to become a kind, honest girl like Kosame.” Urara said, laughing.

“It’d be better if we to were combined into one.” Hooked in, Kosame also retorted back, laughing.

“Ah, even Kosame-chan is beginning to say stuff like that. I am always being told that by Miharuru Ane-sama. But she should know that by now, since her experience as an elder sister has been so long. She has 18 little sisters you know? It’s something she should know well enough by now.” Urara said, making an exasperated face.

“If you are going to be apologizing to Onii-chan tomorrow, should Kosame go together with you?” Kosame said.

Urara’s feet stopped suddenly. Before the two had realized, they were back in front of their room.

“Un. Thanks. But it’s fine. I’ll be alright.” She nosily turned the knob of the door. The load on her chest was a bit lighter now, and she felt like she could go to sleep. Tomorrow, she will take out her favorite Keihin-Touhoku-line train set that she had acquired recently and play with that. Tomorrow is a holiday...

“ThisisbadThisisbadThisbad—” Yuuna and Seika came running into the dining room.

“What’s the fuss about?” Mizore had one last piece of waffle on her plate, as if she had been carefully saving it for last. She had a little melted margarine and red-bean paste spread on top of it, and was about to happily stuff herself with it when she was interrupted.

“Onii-chan has disappeared!”

“Ehhhh~!?”

Mizore choked, and had to have her back massaged by Hotaru. Urara upturned the plate filled with fruit salad, and her skirt became covered with yoghurt. And Hikaru...

Hikaru stood up with a crash, her face pale.

Why? Hikaru's heart was filled with question marks.

They searched the whole room for a note that may have been left behind, but there was nothing. Various small articles had been removed from the room that had belonged to Hikaru before so that Youtarou could stay in it, but now, even Youtarou's things were gone, and only a drab emptiness was left behind. The only thing that had been left behind, was a small bat and ball for kids that Hikaru had owned since she was child and had really treasured back then. She had forgotten it in the room. When she remembered it later after he had arrived, she decided to leave it there, thinking that he may use it. Looking at the empty room, Hikaru stood stock still in a daze.

Seika and Yuuna's faces were contorted and they looked like they were about to cry.

"Yuuna thought that Onii-chan was late, so she would go in and wake him up! So, to cast the "Happy Lucky Honeymoon~! Yuuna's tiny, clever Baku ²³will eat Onii-chan's dreams!" spell, she opened the door, but Onii-chan wasn't there! Uwaan~"

"Seika and everyone did a really bad thing to Onii-chan yesterday, so we thought we'd go to apologize to him. Because the ones who broke the family vase was actually—"

"I know that!" Hikaru snapped without waiting for the trembling Seika's words. Seika flinched.

"Ah...sorry." Even while saying that, Hikaru was unable to suppress her impatience. She was feeling like she had been feeling yesterday evening.

She had said "Don't worry about it" while lightly hugging his somewhat thin body. Hadn't he laughed and nodded? She felt sick to the stomach at the extent of her own thick-headedness.

"Onii-channn~!"

"We're really sorry!!"

"Where did you go?"

The sisters were crying for their brother. Unable to stay there any longer, Hikaru left the room, a little dizzy.

²³ A Baku is a dream-eating spirit.

The criminals had returned to the scene.

Without learning their lesson, they had gathered in the large hall again. Rikka, Seika, Yuuna and Mari had their heads together and were discussing things.

“There’s nothing left to do but go out and search for him!”

“Yuuna agrees!”

“If Mari goes to get him, I’m sure Fersen will be moved very much!”

Only Seika was saying realistic things. “But do you know where to look for him?”

Rikka put a finger in her mouth and thought for a while. “Umm, I guess, somewhere near the croquette shop on the shopping street?”

“Why?”

“Because Onii-chan hasn’t even had had breakfast, you know? He’s bound to be really hungry!”

“I see, that’s our Rikka-chan for you, smart! “You can’t fight with an empty stomach” is what they say, right Seika-chan?” Hearing Yuuna, the “Three kingdoms” loving Seika smiled wryly.

“Hm. But would he be so close? If he wanted to the croquette shop, he wouldn’t have run away from the house.”

“Yeah, that’s what Mari thinks too! Let’s see...if you wanted to run away from home, wouldn’t you normally go to place where your heart feels at peace? If it was Mari Antoinette, she would go to Petit Trianon. If it was Mari, lemme see...I would go to the secret base we built in the mountains behind the house. Bringing along lots of Gugelhupfs, macaroons, chocolate candy and Finanshie filled with almonds with me...”

“Great Mari! That’s a nice idea! I’m sure Onii-chan is also at that secret base! But because he’s a boy so instead of sweets he must have taken along some croquettes— oh wait, we just decided he didn’t go to the croquette shop, umm— taken something like cup noodles or something along.” Rikka was so happy she twirled around.

“Eh? But there is no water there, so how will you make cup noodles? Let’s see, if it was Yuuna, she would take along something better, something softer...like Marshmallows, Strawberry rice cakes, sweet-bean bread and milk—”

“Aahn, that kind of thinking is a little nuts, Yuuna-chan.” *ChiChiChi*, Rikka shook her finger back and forth. “If you take along something like sweet-bean bread along, the bean-paste loving Mizore Onee-chan will go after you and find you immediately. The great arrest of the runaway Yuuna!” She grabbed Yuuna’s hand.

“Uwaan~! I have been found!” Yuuna did a crying impression while laughing.

“Stop it you two! You know this is not the time to be going on and on about that!” Seika couldn’t take it anymore and got angry.

“Yeah, you guys are just talking on and on about eatables.” Even Mari got angry at them. “When Mari said secret base, she meant only in the case of Mari. Fersen must have some other place that Fersen likes. What are we going to do if we don’t think about that?” The elder sister among the kindergarten sisters put her hands on her waist and struck a Queen pose. Both Rikka and Yuuna both went “Yes your majesty” and following the royal decree began thinking as hard as they could.

Places that are familiar to Onii-chan. Places Onii-chan likes. As they thought about it, they became more and more sad. *Maybe, we don’t know anything about Onii-chan at all.* They remembered his smile. This past one month and a half, he had always played with them whenever they asked without declining even once. All they remembered was his face that looked like he was having fun.

Was Onii-chan really having fun at those times? They got worried about it now.

“Well, he’s bound to have climbed on board a train, I’m sure.” At that moment, they heard a voice from the direction of the corridor.

“U, Urara-chan...” Seika was a bit surprised. Before any of them had noticed, Urara and beside her Kosame had opened the sliding door of the big room and were standing there with little bags hung from their shoulders.

“Mari, you can still get on the train for free...You three, do you still have this month’s pocket money?” Urara asked. Seika nodded, and Yuuna and Rikka looked at each other uneasily.

“We are going with you guys too!” Urara said with an expression that said that it was final.

“Ehhhh? But, didn’t Urara-chan—” Yuuna said, trembling.

“Waa! Good girl! Urara-chan has finally become honest! Wow. Urara-chan also loves Onii-chan after all—” Rikka tried to jump on Urara again, but Urara wasn’t about fall for that again. Urara lightly repelled her with one hand, and reached out with her other hand.

“You’re wrong! I am not going to stop hating men! The fact that men are smelly, filthy creatures is still true, and I don’t have any reason to stop him in that regard. But, be it a man or a woman, that person is a part of our family, isn’t he? What choice do I have? I can’t have Kosame and you guys blaming me for driving him out either. And anyways, even if I didn’t follow him around 24/7, the place that that person is likely to go to, even I have an inkling about that.”

“Eh? Where is that?” Yuuna asked.

“Think back. Whenever he talked about his life before he came here, he only talked about two things: His school and his house. A house that he lived in all alone with his grandmother that was beside a river.”

“Ah!”

“His old home...” The sisters only had the image of Youtarou after he had arrived. They had been so busy living with him in the present, they had rarely thought about his past.

“Yes, that’s a good idea! Then, let’s go to the house that Onii-chan lived in before. Let’s GO!”

“Ah, Rikka-chan, you know the address!?” Kosame asked happily.

“Uh-un. I don’t?”

“Rikka-chan...”

Even Mari had a worried expression on her face. Urara spoke up with some irritation in her voice: “Like I said, we need money.”

“Eh?”

“I’ve asked him. I’ve asked that person which station he lived close to before. Ah, don’t get me wrong okay? I was just a little interested in the station...” Urara said, embarrassed, as if she was using an excuse she was not used to. “The station is on the Denentoshi-line. The subway line goes directly there, and is in fact favorite of mine.” Leaving the Urara who had naturally broken into a smile talking about trains, Rikka and Yuuna left in a hurry to find their wallets.

“Uwaan! What should I do! Seika-chan, if Yuuna doesn’t have any money in her wallet because of the mass-buying-eating she did the other day, would lend her some?”

Hikaru was running. She didn't know what else to do, so she had left home alone. She searched here and there, just blindly. Around the station, near fast food stalls, in the bookstore and the CD shop. The net café, the family restaurant. Where ever she could think of. She didn't know where she was headed. Just, doing her best to find a trace of his face. His voice. His presence. Leaving the rest to her instincts. While doing this, her body automatically headed towards that place. To disappear like this, she would never allow it.

That...idiot. Being swayed while riding the train, Hikaru looked outside the window. *I thought I completely convinced him last night. If I am too simple and think too less, then he thinks a little too much. That over-kind...guy. I'll say it as many times as it takes. My...idiot guy.*

The smell of water came to her. Before she knew it, she had arrived near the riverbed where she had first talked with Youtarou.

They got off at the station that ran along the river. The six of them approximately followed the main street that continued on from the station.

“Onii-chan was never raised along with us ever since he was little, right? He hadn’t even entered the family vase when he was little, so I thought that he must’ve been pretty lonely up till now. So I thought that if we found him in the painting on the family vase, he would feel that he really was connected to us. Of course, Onii-chan can’t fit in the vase anymore...” Rikka talked as they walked. It was a little late, but she had plenty of excuses.

Hearing Rikka talk like that, Yuuna couldn’t help but laugh. “If there was vase Onii-chan could fit in, wouldn’t that be awesome? Yuuna would also want to get in with him. Doesn’t it sound fun? Like Aladdin’s magic lamp. The Jin that was living hidden in the lamp, when called out would come out with poof. And then would fulfill lots of wishes for Onii-chan.” She spread her arms wide and pretended to be a magic spirit. She looked to funny so Seika was also roped in and began laughing too.

“That just means that Yuuna-chan wants to get in the vase instead of Onii-chan.” she said. “But Seika also wanted to see if the child representing Onii-chan was on the vase or not. Seika definitely thinks it was painted there, you almost feel like it was destiny. An oath that even if your birthplace was different, when you die, you will face your doom together...Kyaaa! It’s like the “Oath of the Peach Garden”!

These people never did learn.

Walking along, Seika spun once, and then smiled as is she was in play and made a bowing-in-thanks pose. “I’ll be serving you with my life, my dear revered Aniuue-sama!” At the end of her arm she had spread reverently was...

“This is...Onii-chan’s house?” Before they knew it, they had arrived at their destination. Seeing the decrepit public house with vines growing on it, Mari’s eyes went round.

“It...It seems that way.” The lollipop Rikka had in her mouth fell to the ground with a plop.

After making a scene in the police box in front of the station, they had finally learned about house where a funeral was held recently. Following that lead, the house they had arrived at was just too old.

Urara bit her lip. “Looks...pretty bad.”

“It’s like a horror house.” Yuuna murmured.

Kosame was moved to tears. “Onii-chan grew up here, didn’t he?”

The nowadays rare 3 story apartment had a style that looked like it was built in the 1950s. At the entrance —if it could be called that, since it was made with cracked, gray concrete and looked like the entrance to a cave that didn’t get enough sunlight— was a large signboard. On it was an eviction notice. According to that, the inhabitants of the buildings were supposed to empty the apartment in spring two years prior, when their advance payment contract ended. Next to it, 9 warped mailboxes with their red paint peeling off were installed in a 3X3 grid on the wall. On 8 of them, as if to prevent anything from being put inside, X marks were made with packing tape. As they approached the remaining one rather fearfully, they noticed Youtarou’s name written on it.

Everyone went quiet. Nobody said anything. They were all imagining.

Rikka, and Urara, and Kosame, and Seika, and Yuuna, and even Mari, all of them. They were imagining what kind of life their Onii-chan had led there. After his grandmother had passed away, he had lived here, all alone.

“It was Yuuna, I would just have started crying.” Yuuna said with a face that looked like she was going to start crying any moment.

“I wonder with what kind of feelings Onii-chan lived here...” Rikka murmured.

“I’m sure he was very lonely.” Seika replied, sniffing.

“Onii-chan...” Kosame took off her glasses to wipe her eyes. Only Urara got mad.

“You guys, stop it! Don’t you know that’s rude?” Everyone froze. “I’m sure he was living here very happily. Are you guys dumb?” Her hands were shaking. “Otherwise, he would never have become such an idiotic person. Taking on the blame for a vase that he didn’t even break...”

So she had realized it after all.

“He’s so cowardly that even if someone like me got angry at him and said so many horrible things, he wouldn’t even say anything in his defense...”

Seika made a face that said *“That’s not true.”*

“If you tell him to get out he obediently leaves...”

Mari crossed her arms like she was saying *“That’s what it means to not understand the maiden heart.”*

“If I said the same things I said to him to Miharū Ane-sama, do you know how much I would have been scolded...?”

Kosame couldn’t help but break into a light smile.

Around the same time, Youtarou was sitting on the side of the river carrying a large sports bag. He was a little tired. Being so close to the ocean, the river around here was very wide. There were not many people around the huge riverbed. *It is pretty cold after all.* Youtarou shivered a little. *Ah...What do I do now? I just left without a place to go, but this is unexpectedly pretty boring.*

He had a thought earlier, and went to check up on the house he had lived in earlier. But the door was firmly closed, and the apartment's appearance was now like that of a ruin. He did feel a slight pain in his chest, but mysteriously he was able to gaze upon it with calm and peaceful feelings. The public apartment building looked like it was the same age as grandma. When he looked closely at that abandoned building, Youtarou became aware of the fact that an era had come to end. He felt somewhat refreshed.

Now then, what should I do now? Just because I'm feeling refreshed, doesn't mean my troubles are over. I still have nowhere to go. That kind of thinking was also surprisingly fresh, too.

I wonder why? I just lived with those girls for one and a half month, and I have completely adopted their positive way of thinking. No wait, it's less like positive thinking, and more like...no tension at all.

He smiled wryly and thought back on the things he had learned from those girls. Their thoughts were never one. Everyone had their own opinions, their own understanding. If there were 10 of them, there would be 10 different feelings and opinions. If there were 19, there would be 19 different feelings and opinions. That was their way of thinking. And that fact that they were kind enough to accept each other despite that. And they were strong.

He remembered everyone's faces. Rikka and Urara, fighting. The red faced Seika. The almost crying Yuuna and the downcast Mari. And then, their flip sides...Rikka who would begin dancing spontaneously. Urara who would get serious spontaneously. Seika happily talking about Guan Yu Shogun. Yuuna casting magic spells left and right. Mari and Mizuki playing with blocks...And Hikaru.

Hikaru had said that she had to become strong and take up the male role in the family so she could protect her sisters, but was there any need for that? Those sisters had so much kindness and strength. If he had to compare them, he would say that they were all as strong and kind as Hikaru. He remembered the feeling of being lightly hugged by Hikaru.

I am a guy after all. I'm of course not her long lost brother, I'm a complete stranger that could do anything I wanted to her. I get the feeling that that innocent defenselessness is what I should be working to protect.

Youtarou remembered when they had first talked on this riverbed, Hikaru had said that she had to become even stronger to protect her sisters. Youtarou was slightly worried...but then he stopped thinking. If he wanted to find excuses, he could find a ton of them.

The simple fact of the matter is, that house is too good for me. To the younger sisters who have been so kind to me, I'm really sorry. It's like Urara said, I don't have the right to be a part of your family. It's unfortunate, but I was not a long lost sibling of yours. I would have been really, really happy if I was born in this family. I learned to be able to think so honestly like that from watching you all. To be honest, I was just a little jealous of Urara when she was talking so proudly about the vase that told the history of her family. That's because I have nothing like that. I was like duckweed in a cloudy pond in the garden, floating and drifting to that house with nothing but myself. No property or wealth, no family. Nothing particularly of note in my short history. Compared to you, I'm like cheap tissue paper like existence. But. From now on, I'm sure I'll remember all of you again and again like this. That lively and fussy place where the cheers of joyous girls resonate. Where every one of you has found a place for herself. The fun times will forever remain in my memories, unchanged.

I wonder. Would Urara forgive it if it exists just in my mind? Would she forgive the dream that all of you are really my family...?

He stared at the silent, peaceful, almost still surface of the lake for a while.

Now then. He began thinking about his wallet, which he had checked earlier. I drank coffee at the Family Restaurant, which cost 280 yen. That leaves 5846 yen. It's a bit too less to go on a date with a girl. It's so-so for a 15 year olds wallet. But thinking of tonight's stay, it'll be a bit tight. Maybe...I should look for a friend that would let me stay, or...should I finally make my debut as net café live-in? He suddenly realized that his stomach was grumbling. Well, for now, I guess I need 300 yen. It's pretty cold after all. I guess I'll go visit the Takoyaki stall on the road above the riverbed.

So that it wouldn't be at an angle and spill out, he was holding the pack along with the white plastic bag in this hand. It was warming his hand which was completely cold. The irresistible smell of the sauce and dried bonito flakes was drifting out of it.

When he removed the rubber band from around the pack, it made a loud *pakkan* sound and opened. There were two toothpicks attached.

This is pretty hard to decide somehow. Should I use one toothpick to stab it or two? He stabbed a piece with one of the toothpicks. He left one, even though there wasn't anyone to eat it with that would use the other one.

I think I really have been influenced too much. He tried putting a piece of Takoyaki that wasn't steaming in his mouth, and it was unexpectedly hot.

"Ah, h-hot...!" *But, it's delicious.* Tears welled up in his eyes. Probably because the Takoyaki was too hot and delicious.

At that moment, "I finally found you, you idiot!" a voiced came to him from the sky, and at the same time, *BAM!* Something came flying and hit Youtarou directly in the head.

"Ita~!" The thing that had hit his head and then rolled down a fell between his legs was small square wrist band made of white and blue terrycloth. The fact that this wristband had enough weight that it could be thrown with enough power to hurt when it hit was because Hikaru had secretly modified it to carry around sand in it for training purposes.

Youtarou turned and looked back. The one standing there, holding a plastic bag pointed his way, was Hikaru. "This is your treat, got that?"

Even though he had left the house prepared for the worst, when Hikaru came into his view, he somehow felt that this was not unexpected at all. Youtarou smiled despite himself. His eyes filled with tears. He looked upwards so they wouldn't spill out. Hikaru, who had ran down the slope of the embankment, was a little out of breath. The smile on her face...was shining and sparkling. Even though it was the middle of winter, there was trace of sweat on her forehead.

"What, you bought it too?" Looking at Youtarou's hand with surprise, Hikaru laughed embarrassedly. "Idiot. You're supposed to mention these things earlier. Now I bought one too!"

Facing the river, the two were sitting side by side. Hikaru, sitting rather defenselessly with her knees drawn up while wearing a mini-skirt, gave him a piece of Takoyaki she had bought.

“Ah, h-hot!”

Hikaru laughed. “This isn’t that hot, you know. Are you may be bad with hot things?” Saying that, Hikaru clumsily picked a piece and put it in her mouth.

“Ah, hot!”

“See, I told you it was hot.” Seeing Hikaru’s bewildered face, Youtarou began laughing too.

Ahahaha!” Just what it was that was so funny, even he didn’t know. The laughter just wouldn’t stop welling up from the bottom of his stomach. For a while, both of them laughed together. Then, when both of their voices died down naturally, Hikaru, without looking at Youtarou, said calmly.

“You’re coming back, aren’t you?”

“.....”

“I mean, you now have no other home than our place.” Hikaru said, a little cautious of whether he would be hurt by those words or not. Youtarou remembered the appearance of the public apartment that was almost in ruins.

“I mean...” Hikaru continued. “It’s not really...like I want you to come home.”

It’s not!? Then how is it!?

“It’s just that it will be troubling for us if you don’t come back.” Hikaru said with a discontent look. “Do you understand?”

Yes. That’s what he wanted to reply. “But, I’m sure that at that house, it’ll better if I—”

Youtarou was about to say when Hikaru interrupted him. “Idiot. Don’t say that.”

Hearing those words cut down his own so fast, Youtarou tried to persist. “No I mean really—”

Seeing that Youtarou was being persistent, Hikaru gulped down the remaining pieces of Takoyaki and said to Youtarou: “I told you not to say that! Do you know what a family means? A family is not people you are supposed to be so reserved around. Have you forgotten already? The day after you came to our home, you made a promise in front of Miharu Ane, Mizore Ane, Haruka and me that you would become our family.”

Would you call that a promise? Half the reason he had agreed was spur of the moment...Is what he thought, but since Hikaru was technically right, he didn’t say anything.

“.....”

“And yesterday night too, you promised that you wouldn’t worry about it anymore, and seeing your smile, I was able to completely feel at ease.” He remembered, again, the feeling of the body that had gently embraced him last night. As a family member, as a friend, they should have shared their feelings, and yet...

Wrinkles were forming on Hikaru’s forehead. “Oi! You. Say something! Why are you clamming up on me? You worry on your own, then decide to be reserved on your own...without saying anything to me, just smiling...” Hikaru’s hands began shaking, her expression becoming more and more grave. “You don’t even trust me that much!? Even though we are family. We’re even of the same age. I was supposed to be the closest family member to you, and yet...Ahh! Now I’m getting angry.”

Hikaru suddenly said in a low voice “The family rule number 1 “Don’t be reserved” and rule number 4 “Don’t tell lies” have been broken, right?”

Eh~!?

Hikaru, who was sitting beside Youtarou, suddenly got up, and grabbed Youtarou’s collar...

“Eei YAH~!”

...and threw him. In that instant, Youtarou flew.

Just as he was realizing that something was happening to his body, the blue sky and the green earth had already switched places and rotated back into place. Before he could think of anything else, his back connected with the ground with a loud *don* noise. His limbs sprawled pitifully, like an upturned insect.

Awawawawa...He couldn’t speak due to the shock. In that moment, his world had been literally turned upside down.

Seoi-Nage²⁴...One blow.

²⁴ A Seoi-Nage is a shoulder throw in Judo.



As Hikaru straightened herself up, she was a little out of breath. Her cheeks were flushed. To Youtarou sprawled on the ground, Hikaru's childish —considering her age— panties were fully visible, but of course, now was not the time to be admiring the view.

“With that, I'll forgive the violation of the family rules. If you don't want this happening you again, you might want to follow the family rules from now on.” Hikaru said, getting down on all fours, leaning over Youtarou's face and suddenly brining her face closer to his. Her long, silky, chestnut-colored hair lightly fell on his face. She had big eyes.

“Don't you know? A family member doesn't have the option to 'quit' his family. Have you heard that?” Her serious expression didn't waver one bit. “One can't quit his family of his own violation. Even if you die, your family is your family, forever. No matter how far you run away, you can't run away from the fact that you are family. Your family is not something you choose. It's just something that is decided. That's why, don't forget. Forever and ever, even if you die, for us, you are a part of our family.”

Her confession was like a small, awkward, heart-to-heart between two boys. But Hikaru was unmistakably a beautiful girl. This was further proved by the dazzling, healthy thighs extending from her mini-skirt. Seeing them made Youtarou's heart beat a little faster.

It was sunset, and the two were walking along the riverbed, headed towards the station, when they heard the “Yuuyake Koyake²⁵” chime, encouraging the return home. In the sky, which was still a bit light, stars were beginning to appear.

Before he knew it, Hikaru had slipped her hand into Youtarou’s. He wondered how many years it had been since he had walked while holding hands with anyone.

Ahh, I’m returning home... Youtarou thought.

And then, after they had passed the Takoyaki stand, they met several small figures running in their direction.

“Ahh! We followed the smell of Takoyaki, and found Onii-chan!”

“Uwaan~! Onii-chan, I’m sorry!”

“Please don’t go anywhere anymore!”

“I promise I’ll be good girl from now on!”

He heard both sad cries and joyous shouts...

²⁵ Yuuyake Koyake is a melody that is used as a signal in Japan. It means that children have finished school and can go home.

Chapter 4 – Good Morning our Class!

36

It was the 4th of April.

The flowers of the Sakura trees had completely fallen down.

It has become pretty rare to see Sakura trees in full bloom on entrance ceremony days lately. I guess these are the effects of that global warming thing? Thinking such things, Youtarou looked up at the school gate.

Konohana Private School.

So, I have finally arrived. Oh man, this is pretty nerve-wracking after all.

A giant Sakura tree towered over the big gate, like it was testifying to the prestigious history of the school. As Youtarou was hesitating to enter...

“What are you doing hulking around the entrance blocking the path? You’re in the way!”

Feeling a slight impact on his behind, Youtarou staggered forward a little. It seemed a swung bag had hit him.

“Really now, you’re just zoning out. As would be expected from a servant. Really, don’t you think going to the same school as us is a little too much for you, or just a plain waste of time?” From behind came the rapid-fire voice of Tsurara.

Now that I think about it, the middle school was also on the same campus. Hurriedly getting out of the way, he became a little worried. *So that means that everyone above the 7th daughter, namely Rikka, Tsurara, Hotaru, Hikaru, Haruka and Mizore, all six go to the same school...*

Tsurara, who was in middle school, was wearing a dark blue sailor uniform that was different from the white sailor uniform that Rikka and Hotaru wore. She looked noble somehow. Youtarou recalled that Tsurara had wanted to get into a special class for the most distinguished students in the same school. Her future dream was to become a scholar.

Passing by Youtarou, Tsurara laughed through her nose. “Now listen here you. Mama decided that you were to go to the same school as us, so that can’t be helped, but make sure that the fact that you are living with us doesn’t get found out. We 19 sisters are known throughout the

whole school, so if your cover gets blown and everyone finds out that I'm living with servant like you, it'll be really annoying for me!"

"I know that." He replied. *It'll make my life harder too if that gets found out.*

"I wonder. If you really get it then that's fine. You do have a servant brain after all. Mama is also at fault. I wish she wouldn't have put this servant in the same school as and gave the reason "It was just easier to take care of the paperwork for him because Rikka is also beginning middle school this year". A servant should have more servant-like way of life..."

"If you dawdle around here, you're going to be late to the special class that you worked so hard to get in. Or maybe you want the fact that we are all family to be discovered so soon?" Hikaru, who had appeared behind Tsurara poked her in the back.

"O-Ouch! Ah, it's this time already! The special class was the in the annex at the far back, right? I've got to hurry! I'll see you later, Hikaru Ane-sama! Servant, as for you...let's see, you can get lost on the way home and don't have to come back." Even as she was hurrying forward, she kept looking back again and again.

"Tsurara-chan, you might want to hurry, or we are gonna leave you behind." Being rushed by Rikka and Hotaru who had gone ahead, Tsurara waved her hand one last time and finally dashed off. "I'll see you back at home, Mizore Ane-sama, Haruka Ane-sama, Hikaru Ane-sama!" She shouted as she ran off, emphasizing their names.

"She's not honest with herself at all." Mizore, seeing her off, laughed.

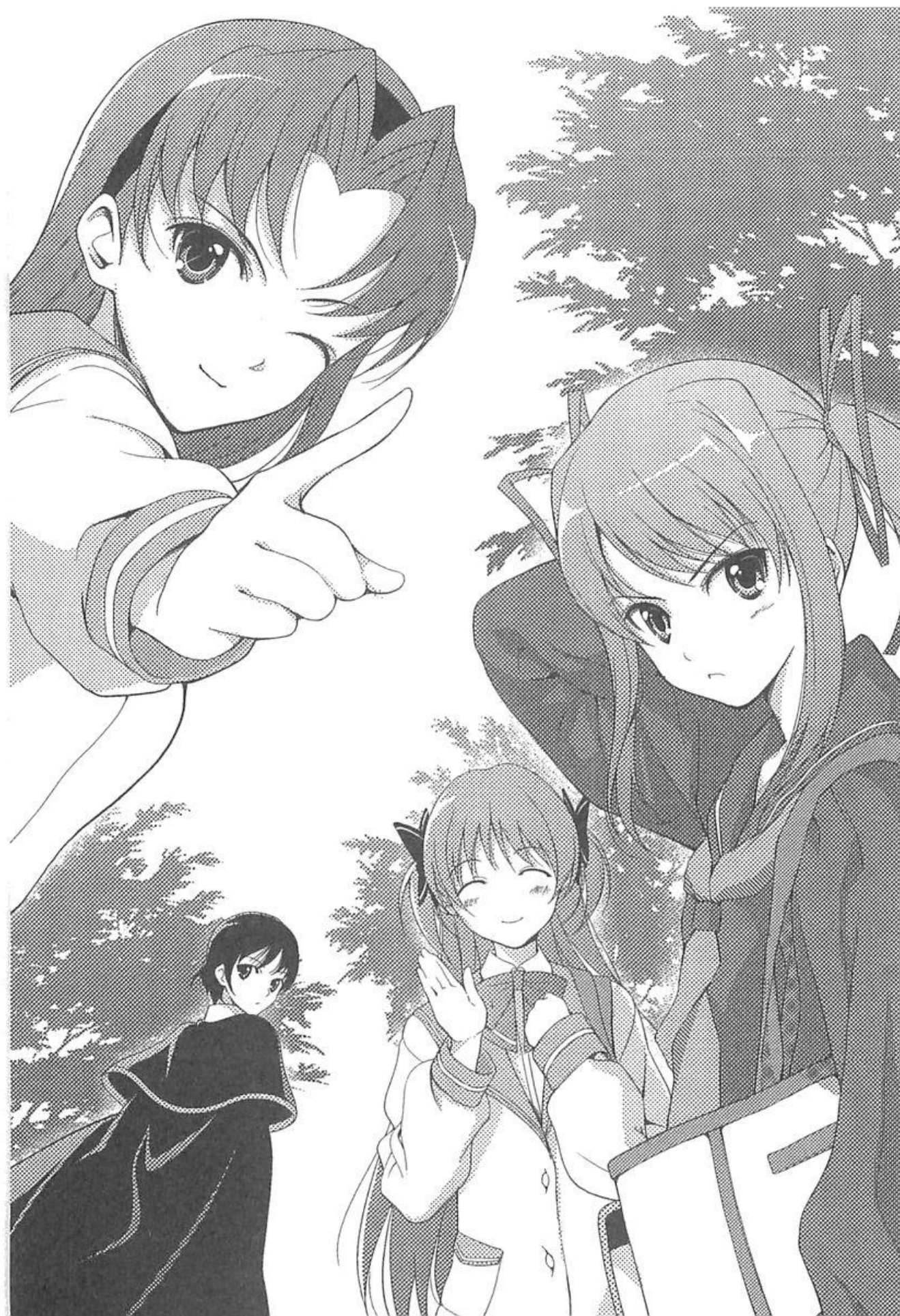
"Well then Ouji-sama, even though we came this far together, I'm really sad that we have to part here. I'll be going on then."

"Ah, take care then." Youtarou was caught off guard and replied frankly, and Haruka suddenly took his hand in her own. She held his hand in front of her chest and squeezed it firmly. Of course, that was little troublesome for Youtarou.

"Ahh, I'm really sad. If only I could be in the same class as Hikaru-chan and Ouji-sama..." She took his hand rubbed it against her cheek. "Oh, I know! It's not too late! Haruka is not too confident in her studying abilities, and she can request the teacher to—"

"It's not good to repeat grades in high school, you know." Mizore said in a cool manner.

"Is that really the case?" Keeping his hand clasped in hers, she peeked at Youtarou's face with upturned eyes. "Does Haruka's Ouji-sama hate stupid girls?" She suddenly asked him.



Youtarou, who had entered into this former all-girls school as a male minority and thus did not even have to give an entrance test, remembered his own circumstances and winced a little. As he was pondering, Hikaru whispered to him from behind. “You idiot. It doesn’t matter how you feel, just tell her that you hate stupid girls for now.”

“Ah...y-yeah. Th-That’s right. Girls have to be smart right? That way it’ll help me too...Aha-Ahahaha...” Youtarou scratched his head in an exaggerated manner.

“Aw, is that so? Of course it is...Girls have to be smart... but not only that they have to be cute, and they have to be able to cook too...” Haruka, who felt dejected for a moment, began recovering as she mumbled to herself.

All damage was nulled by the time she spoke again.

“That’s a relief. Haruka also likes girls like that. It’s good to have at least one wife that’s older than you, right? Ufufu~. Well then, it’s too bad, but Haruka will be going first. I’ll study hard and become a good bride— I mean sister for you.” Along with Haruka who had completely regained her good mood, Mizore, muttering “What was that all about...” headed off in the direction of their respective classes.

“Now then, should we go too?” Hikaru breathed a sigh of relief. From today, Hikaru and Youtarou were going to be in the same class.

Classmates.

Classmates and also siblings.

And, in reality, completely unrelated.

“Today is the opening ceremony. And after that, we freshmen are gonna have our body measurements taken.” Hikaru said.

“You, make sure not peek on the girls...okay?”

---Baby Princess Volume 1 END---

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